



Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #4

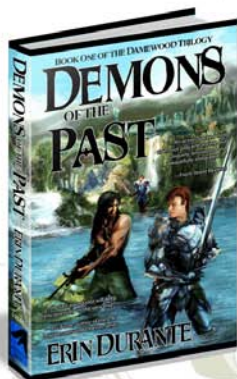
AUGUST 2009

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COMING SOON IN GRAPHIC NOVEL FORM

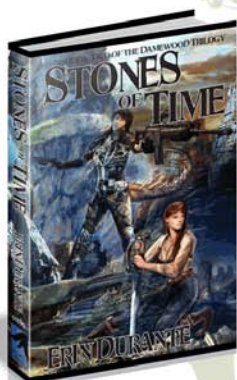
BOOK ONE OF THE AWARD WINNING TRILOGY



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August 2009

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EDITORIAL: KEEL AND LOVECRAFT

Nathan Shumate

On July 3, 2009, John A. Keel died at the age of 79.

Keel was a pioneering writer about UFOs and the supernatural in the 1970s, best known for books like *The Mothman Prophecies*. His theories flew (and fly) in the face of the prevailing belief held by UFO buffs that flying saucers were straightforward visitors from another planet, and defied the strict separations that held UFOs, cryptozoology, and supernatural/psychic phenomena apart. From where Keel sat, they were all connected in some way that was no more than darkly hinted at by the encounters themselves.

Keel accepted contactee and abductee experiences as real, but realized quite rightly that just because Something contacts you does not mean that the Something is to be trusted. The accounts which contactees brought back from the “Space Brothers” were contradictory in details, and the broad outlines in which they agreed were those in which the UFO occupants were fulfilling the expectations of the contactees. UFOs were telling us what we expected to hear. In the ’50s, it was benign Nordic-featured humans from Venus telling us of a Cosmic Confederacy that awaited our inclusions; in the ’80s it was alien-looking aliens which abducted helpless people against their will and used them for experiments in hybridization. In the 1890s, it was airships with technology just beyond the cutting edge, piloted by respectable middle American types. In the Middle Ages, it was fairies and pied pipers. Whatever the phenomenon was, it was inherently deceptive.

Given that the phenomenon expressed itself in whatever form would make sense to the people who observed it, Keel saw no reason to believe the extraterrestrial hypothesis. Whatever this phenomenon is, he reasoned, it echoes all through human history. Yesterday’s fairy changeling is today’s abducted pregnancy; yesterday’s Flying Dutchman is today’s flying saucer. Whatever is behind it all has always been with us. He coined the term “ultraterrestrial” to denote, if not fully

describe, the active force behind it all.

I read Keel’s books *Our Haunted Planet* and *Strange Creatures From Time and Space* in my impressionable youth, and *The Eighth Tower* sometime thereafter. Oddly enough, it wasn’t until recently, in honor of his death, that I finally tackled *The Mothman Prophecies*, the most famous of his books. Like his other books, it is a compendium of encounters with the bizarre, showing odd correspondences between phenomena which are often thought completely unrelated to indicate that there is some sort of pattern behind it all, of which we only see the tip of the iceberg. Unlike the other books mentioned, though, *The Mothman Prophecies* features Keel not only as the author but as the protagonist. It centers on his investigation of the sightings of the “Bird” or “Mothman” and associated paranormal events in Virginia in 1966-67, and as he investigates the phenomenon, the phenomenon suddenly decide to investigate *him*. Not only is he the subject of strange visitors, odd telephone problems, and other experiences which show that he has attracted the Something’s attention, third parties in the area are contacted by mysterious parties—the classic “Men in Black,” which he publicized in his previous writings—in an apparent effort to simultaneously entice and mislead his attentions.

And as I absorbed this tale in which a curious modern man encounters repeated intelligent actions which show a pattern but not a rationale, I suddenly realized: John Keel is the best real-world equivalent to the classic Lovecraftian protagonist.

Obviously, the parallel is inexact; for instance, he never once went insane, nor did he ever conclude a handwritten account with his words trailing off to a sudden scrawl in mid-sentence.

The biggest difference, though, is in the character of what he encountered. In the “pure” Lovecraft tale, the being encountered may be intelligent, but utterly alien and just as utterly heedless of humanity’s attention or efforts. Unlike either the pantheons of recognizably human and fallible deities or the vision of an ultimately good Supreme Being historically conceived, Lovecraft cast a pantheon of beings who could not be described by any word short of godlike, but which held as much regard for mankind as the impersonal universe which was unfolding to science at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. By contrast, the phenomenon or phenomena which Keel dealt with seemed almost psychotically drawn to messing with people, a combination of demonic influence, trickster god, and reflexive action. Sometimes he even wondered if the intelligence(s) behind it all were truly sentient, or

whether they were primarily reactive, as unable to control their interactions with humans as the humans were themselves.

I don't know how much of Keel's account and conclusions I believe or accept. But I know that man is a pattern-seeking being; thanks to being predator, prey, and social animal, we seek schemata to organize the data we encounter in the world around us. Both the skeptics and the aficionados of the paranormal are no less human than the rest of us, and exhibit the nigh-universal tendency of seizing on a self-sufficient explanation, crediting all data which supports that explanation, and rejecting (or simply willing oneself not to see) the rest. Keel instead accepted all relevant data, even if that meant mixing material from different bookshelves, sacrificing a pat answer for a dimmer, broader understanding. He never claimed to know what exactly he had investigated; he never understood the pattern; he only sensed that the pattern was there, that it encompassed UFOs, cryptozoology, ghosts, and psychic phenomena, and that it might ultimately be something that will stay forever beyond our comprehension.

He never, to my knowledge, quoted Lovecraft in any of his books, but this awareness of a pattern which he couldn't comprehend, in which his mental reach exceeded his grasp, dovetails in a startling fashion with the oft-quoted paragraph which opens "The Call of Cthulhu":

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. ●

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HAUNT SQUAD

Maurissa Guibord

“Guys, I’m not going to lie to you,” said Frank. “The ratings have been rather disappointing, to say the least.”

Frank looked at Duke and me across the table, gave a rueful smile and then sawed into his egg white omelet with more gusto than I thought was really appropriate for the situation, or the egg whites for that matter. But nothing seems to faze Frank. He’s a television producer and I guess he’s used to dealing with the ups and downs. Apparently we were on the way down. To tell the truth, I was rather relieved. I hadn’t been comfortable with this whole idea from the beginning and would be glad to see the end of it.

But beside me Duke straightened up. He gaped at Frank and blinked, like he was trying to clear his head of a bad dream. “What the hell,” he sputtered. “They’ve only aired like three episodes, right? Isn’t it kind of early to be talking ratings?”

“Never too early to talk ratings,” Frank replied around the eggs. “And you have to admit, there’s a problem.” He put down his fork. “We marketed *you*, Harold,” he gave me a nod, “as the foremost ghost hunter in this country. And for a show entitled “Haunt Squad,” there seems to be a surprising lack of, well... *ghosts*.”

Haunt Squad. God, how I hated that name. It was nothing but puerile sensationalism. But apparently the testing groups, whoever they were, had decided that my suggestions for titles had been too academic sounding, not intriguing enough.

Duke slammed a fist on the table, then leaned forward until he was practically in Frank’s breakfast special. “That’s because this is a scientific research team,” he said, then jerked a nod at me. “Tell him, Harold.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s true, um, that there has been little, uh, verifiable objective data on the site visits so far. But that’s hardly unusual in paranormal research.” Frank stirred a packet of sweetener into his coffee, clanking the spoon noisily as I went on. “Most reports

are, in fact, hoaxes or simply natural phenomenon that people mistake for something spectral. One of the goals of our show is to debunk false information and ease people’s concerns about, um, ghosts.” my voice trailed off. This is why Duke usually did the talking. I was just no good at it.

“Well, lads,” said Frank cheerfully, giving no indication that he was moved by what I said, or even indeed that he had heard it. He stood up, unfolded some bills and tossed them onto the check. “The news is that you’d better start getting something or...”

“Or... what?” I asked.

Frank gave me an indulgent wink. “You’re the psychic, Harold, you figure it out.”

“Paranormal psychologist,” I said under my breath to Frank’s retreating figure. I’m a paranormal psychologist, not a psychic. Nor a medium, mentalist, spiritualist or anything else. I wish people would get that straight.

“Wow.” Duke ran his big fingers through his silver-blond hair, then leaned back in the booth. “Didn’t see that coming, Harold.” He shook his head. “What are we gonna do?”

“Do?” I repeated. I checked the bill and added a fiver to make a decent tip. “There is nothing to do,” I told him. “These are scientific investigations. They’re not meant to be entertaining.”

“Yeah, but Frank’s right.” Duke frowned and started drumming his pinky ring against his coffee cup. “I mean, people expect something. How long are they gonna be satisfied watching a show where nothing more exciting happens than a blip on one of your thermal gadgets or a buzz on the electric meter?” He looked at me.

“Electromagnetic field meter,” I corrected. This was why we had to cut out a lot of Duke’s audio from the final tapes of the show. He didn’t have a handle on even the most basic principles of paranormal field work. And yet if it hadn’t been for Duke, there wouldn’t be a show.

Duke Dennis was football player. Not that I follow these things, but apparently he was quite successful for a professional team in Seattle until he tore a ligament in his right knee. After that he had dabbled in real estate, successfully, and bought two franchises of Tippy Tom’s donuts. Duke approached me six months earlier about becoming business partners and developing a television show about, as he called it, “ghost hunting.” The timing was good. My grant from the National Institute of Paranormal Studies had just been declined for renewal and,

frankly, I needed the money.

The waitress came by and gathered up the plates.

Duke gave her a lop-sided smile and pushed the check and the bills toward her. "That's all set, darlin'."

"Thanks, Duke, I mean, Mr. Dennis," she gushed.

Duke might have known nothing about Gaussian fields, infrared thermal detectors or digital voice recorders, but he had something more important. He was a 'personality.' Six-foot-five and, at a guess, 250 pounds, he was tanned, blond and Nordic-looking with a deep bass voice and a dimple in his chin. Next to him I'm afraid the closest visual comparison I would offer of myself would be that of Elmer Fudd. Well, maybe not quite that bad, but nobody gushed when I paid the check, let's put it that way.

The opening credits of the show always featured Duke driving up a darkened road, and then unloading our equipment from his gleaming black Range Rover with the vanity plates HAUNTSQD against the drumming background of the theme music. He did that exactly once, for the first show. Since then the only thing he hauled in the back of that Rover were coolers full of beer. He never even let anybody ride with him. And he never touched the equipment, which was just as well. But as far as the audience was concerned, Duke Dennis was the head of the Haunt Squad.

That was fine with me; Duke seemed to be in his element in front of a camera. I was more used to working alone. I took my time, I was careful and I usually worked during the day, not at night. There is absolutely no scientific reason for this pervasive belief that all hauntings or paranormal events occur at night.

Personally, I think it's just *people* that get weird at night.

"That next spot is looking good, that one in Maine?" Duke shrugged into his black leather coat and put on his sunglasses.

"Perhaps," I answered.

"Don't worry, Harold. You're gonna pull this baby out the hat. I've got faith in you, my friend." Duke gave me a couple of hard claps on the shoulder and strolled out.

I gathered that was some form of half-time, locker-room camaraderie and I knew Duke meant well but still I bristled, because there it was again. The unspoken suggestion that somehow I could simply *make* things happen, or that I wasn't trying hard enough. I was the ghost hunter, right? Therefore, wherever I went, there must be ghosts. Well, it doesn't work that way. I don't pretend to have any sort of

special powers. I just have a lifelong fascination, yes, that is the word for it, with the supernatural.

My fascination began when I was ten, on August 18th 1976. I remember the date so well because it was my sister Eileen's birthday. She was having a slumber party.

"Come on, Harry, we need another person," said Eileen over some whispering and hushed giggles. "We're going to levitate Carleen."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Carleen Chapowski was Eileen's best friend, a buxom fourteen-year-old with braces and curly ash blonde hair who always smelled of Jean Nate. At that moment she lay on her back, giggling, on our shag carpet while the other five girls knelt alongside her.

"Okay, everybody put two fingers underneath. Like this," ordered Eileen. She placed each of her index fingers under Carleen's shoulders. I was directed to kneel at Carleen's hips, which I did, with a guilty sense of excitement. What was happening, I was sure, was something we weren't supposed to be doing. Something dangerous, even. To this day I recall the overwhelming sensations as I slid my fingers underneath Carleen's warm rump. I could feel the texture of the soft blue material of her nightgown, decorated with white daisies, the elastic band of her underwear.

"Spirits," said my sister in a deep, warbling voice that I knew she was copying from the announcer for Creature Double Feature on channel 56 but which thrilled me anyway. "Lift the body of Carleen. Make her as light as a feather. On the count of three. Light as a feather. One... two... three..."

And then it happened. It worked. I held my breath and I watched the daisy printed flannel go up and up before my eyes. Carleen was floating. By the time my arms were outstretched above me, I felt like I was barely touching her. It was impossible, but it was happening. And at that moment the air changed. It's hard for me to explain or even remember, but the light around us took on a strange, golden quality. It was like the light you see at dusk in the summertime when it's time to go home but you want to stay outside just a little longer. Even the colors looked more vivid; everything was brilliant and alive, like in Technicolor. Carleen was up there in that magical golden light, suspended above our heads. Then someone, my sister I think, gave a shriek and she came tumbling down, amidst gales of laughter. It was over. Everything was normal again. No one else seemed to have seen what I did, and I was too dazed to say anything about it.

Of course, I know now it's a parlor trick. If the weight is distributed evenly a relatively small amount of force can move a seemingly impossible amount of weight. But this was different. I still recall that marvelous feeling of... what was it? Something *beyond*. Unfortunately, I never experienced it again.

But I always kept looking.

It was one week later that we finally had all the crew and equipment assembled at the site for the next investigation.

Newcombe House was a grand-looking old place, Victorian in style complete with cupolas and turrets, sitting on a rocky projection on Pemaquid Point. It certainly looked like the classic haunted house. But I had my doubts. The owners, Ed and Marcie James were a middle-aged couple who had retreated from office jobs in the city, purchased the house, restored it and were now running it as a bed and breakfast. Personally, I thought that their claims of late night noises and a "woman in white" seen gliding along the widow's walk were a facile attempt to boost bookings in the off season.

"Where do you want this, Harold?" said Jeremy, hefting one of the motion detectors.

Jeremy was the first technical crew person we had hired for the show. He was a graduate student in clinical social work and was writing a thesis on the correlation of major depression and belief in the paranormal. He was tall and lanky, with frizzy reddish hair and pale, freckled skin. Most days Jeremy seemed strung together with little more than nervous energy, fueled by the hellish-looking cups of black coffee that he drank. But he was bright and enthusiastic and seemed to grasp the importance of details in our work.

"Just inside the entryway for now. Thanks."

A girl stomped in behind Jeremy dragging a sloppily looped coil of cable. Her roughly cropped, blue-black hair and sooty eye makeup aside, Cassandra Jewett was an attractive girl, or might have been, except for all the awful hardware that was fastened to her face. Rings through the eyebrows, through the tongue, and in the nose were one thing, but what possesses a girl to put what looks like one-inch PVC piping through her earlobes is beyond me. But she and Jeremy appealed to the younger viewers and added "edge."

Cassandra dumped the cable on the steps and slouched against one of the front pillars. She lit up one of the clove cigarettes that she was constantly puffing on and squinted through the smoke.

Cassandra spent most of her time in the trailer, listening to her ipod. She did help out with the data extraction, though. She and Jeremy would sit, hours at a time, viewing the video recordings and listening to the audio. She even turned out to have a surprisingly good eye and a good ear, sometimes pointing out small aberrations that even I missed. But nothing seemed to spark her interest. The only time she showed any signs of life were when Duke was around. On those occasions she would follow him around like some kind of gothic puppy. Duke, of course, seemed to enjoy the attention.

Finally, after we had all the equipment unloaded, Duke appeared. Beside the two-man filming crew, there were just four of us for this site: myself, Duke, Jeremy and Cassandra.

"This place is awesome, Harold," Duke said, slapping me on the back. "I've been checking it out upstairs. Spoo-ky. This is gonna be something. I tell you, we're gonna have them freakin' out."

Duke seemed awfully chipper for what was probably going to be our last show.

Bob and Marcie were only too happy to be filmed and to regale us with the story of their experiences in Newcombe house. "The house was built in 1849 by a sea captain named Thomas Newcombe," said Marcie, standing out in front, with the house as a backdrop, "He died in a terrible storm at sea in 1902."

I had researched the house's history and knew that it was actually built in 1856 and the builder had not been Thomas Newcombe but his brother-in-law Jason Whitten. Whitten made his fortune harvesting guano from Newfoundland for crop fertilizer. And Thomas wasn't a captain but a bo'sun on a schooner named Remembrance. But I didn't correct them. I had long since given up on any semblance of scientific advancement from this nonsense. Hopefully, this *would* be the last time. Then I would get back to real research.

"That's right," Bob was chiming in. "And there's been lot's of people who have seen the ghost of his young bride Edwina right up there, waiting for him to come home." He pointed up to the widow's walk, a long narrow balcony that ran the length of the top floor. It faced out to sea and was surrounded by a white railing.

"They say that she killed herself right up there," said Marcie. "She drank arsenic in a cup of tea after hearing about his death." She gave a visible shiver.

That part was true. The local historical society had the letter that Edwina wrote just before she killed herself, telling her sister that she

couldn't face a future without her husband.

Duke turned to face the camera. "The woman in white," he said. "Will she make an appearance for the Haunt Squad tonight? Who knows? But," he added his signature phrase as he pointed at Bob and Marcie: "We're gonna get you some answers."

I cringed every time he did that. But the testing groups loved him.

Our first step was always a survey, to get the layout of the house and plan the placement of the recording equipment. But something strange happened before we even started. Cassandra stepped through the front doorway and immediately stopped.

"What's the matter, Cass?" said Jeremy, standing behind her.

We were standing on the marble floored entranceway. Directly in front of us stood a sweeping spiral staircase. Cassandra stared at it. Her heavily outlined eyes widened and followed the stairs up to the second floor landing. I looked up. There was a portrait hanging there in a gilt frame, of a slim young woman in a blue gown.

Cassandra rubbed a hand over her stomach. "I don't feel so good," she said, and abruptly turned. "I'm gonna stay in the van," she called over her shoulder as she ran out the door.

Later I would wish we'd all followed her.

The owners began giving their tour of the house. Bob and Marcie proudly guided us through the cherry-paneled library with its massive hewn-stone fireplace, and then the kitchen, with granite-topped island, gleaming copper pans and a restaurant quality stove, hooded in polished stainless steel.

"Nothing but the best," crowed Bob into the camera, which I'm sure was directed out to all the potential guests that he was anticipating after this show aired. We traipsed through six refurbished bedrooms, all with four-poster beds, creaky wide board pine floors, and tastefully coordinated bedspreads and curtains.

Finally we came to the last bedroom room on the third floor. The room where Edwina Pembroke had died was surprisingly ordinary and decorated much like the others.

"That's where I've seen her," said Marcie, pointing out the narrow double doors that framed a view of darkening sky.

I opened the French doors and a gust of cold wind blew in as I stepped out onto the narrow landing. I immediately braced myself against the house, hugging the clapboards to my back and stepping sideways made a quick survey of the creaky widow's walk. I didn't stay

long; I don't like heights.

The Jameses packed up their Volvo and left for the night to stay with friends as we finished setting up our stationary equipment. I did a preliminary scan of the house with a portable trifield detector and quickly identified and mapped some stable field disturbances near electrical outlets, lamps, appliances, that kind of thing. Nothing out of the ordinary. Jeremy did the thermal survey.

"Whoa. Hey, look at this." Jeremy said suddenly. He was standing in the entryway, staring at the probe. I took a look. It was reading 42 degrees. That was 22 degrees colder than the last reading he had recorded, a few feet away. I looked around. We were standing in precisely the same spot where Cassandra had suddenly felt ill, I realized. Odd. And nothing but background readings on the EMF meter.

"It's an old house," I said. I put my hand down to the floor at the base of the front door. "You can feel a draft here." We measured again but didn't get the cold spot. "Just document it," I told Jeremy. "Could have been an equipment glitch." I've found that it's best not to get too carried away with a single piece of data. But it was strange.

The darkness was setting in and the sound of the surf outside seemed louder than before, almost like it was rolling and slapping right outside the window. The tide must have come in. It was an unsettling noise, insistent and endless. It would be hard to sleep tonight, not that we ever got much sleep on these nights, usually a few hours at most.

We set out the motion detectors in a couple of locations, turned on the night vision video recorders, and started the digital voice recorders.

Duke handed everyone a flashlight and as I took mine I noticed his hand was shaking. I had never seen him nervous before. But Jeremy was acting strange too, hovering around Cassandra, who had apparently recovered from her previous whatever-it-was and was now slumped on a sofa reading magazines and not paying any attention to the setup. As if to prove she was completely back to normal she muttered, "I don't understand why I can't even have a smoke."

She knew perfectly well I don't allow smoking on site; it makes too much artifact in the video. Duke pulled me aside and said under his breath, "Harold, You've got to do something about that kid."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking over at Cassandra. She looked fine now; maybe more animated than usual, flicking her flashlight back and forth over the mirrors in the living room, sending beams of stark light criss-crossing through the darkness and dancing off

the silver studs in her nose and eyebrows.

"There's something weird about her. I think we should get rid of her after this show. You tell her, okay?" said Duke.

Before I had a chance to answer he called out and gave the cameraman a signal to start filming. "Lights out."

We split up then, Duke and I walking through the basement and downstairs while Cassandra and Jeremy surveyed the upper floors.

"Is there anyone here? Do you want to communicate with us?" Duke's voice sounded thin and forced in the silence of the library. The only answer was the ticking of a clock over the fireplace. It was almost midnight. We had been recording for three hours and had covered every square inch of the house. I was tired and sat down on the sofa, sending a little flurry of dust into the beam of Duke's flashlight.

"You want to take a break?"

"Why not," I said. The house was a bust; I could tell we would get nothing here. And yet I had hoped....

"I'm gonna get a coffee, you want one?" said Duke.

"No thanks." The cameraman stopped filming as Duke went to the kitchen. I stayed on the sofa, listening to the faint, mechanical pulse of the clock and the muffled crashing of the surf outside. I wondered if the other two had come across anything. It had been strangely quiet upstairs, now that I thought about it. Usually Cassandra would get into a squabble or get bored and leave by this length of time. I closed my eyes. I think I fell asleep but awoke with a sudden jerk. Everything was quiet and dark.

"Guys? Duke?" There was no answer. The cameraman was gone. The room was empty.

I made my way to the front hall and stood at the foot of the spiral stairs. I looked up, and as I did a young woman's face stared back at me. Her disembodied head floated above the stairs, surrounded with an aura of golden light.

My heart thudded in my chest as the light shone on her huge, dark eyes and pallid face. For a split second fear collided with something else, recognition, perhaps, of a feeling from a long time ago.

And then I realized. I let out a shaky breath. It was just the portrait of Edwina Pembroke on the landing. The golden aura was the light reflecting off the gilt frame. As my hand steadied I could make out the faint smile that played around her lips.

"Good one, Edwina," I said, under my breath.

"Duke, come on out here," I called. "You'd love this."

But there was no answer. That is, until someone screamed. The sound wasn't loud, it was distant and wavering and strangely, it seemed to have come from outside.

I ran to the front door and opened it, only to have the wind nearly whip it from my hands. I stumbled out along the brick pathway in the darkness. In the distance there was an intermittent glow where the phosphorescent-white of the surf broke against the black rocks on the beach.

I was sure there had been a cry. "Hello!" I shouted.

Then I saw the dark outlines of Duke, Jeremy and the two cameramen as they came running out of the house.

"What the hell was that?" yelled Duke.

"Where's Cassandra?" said Jeremy to the rest of us.

"She supposed to be with you," said Duke.

"Well, she was, but—"

His voice got broken off as another scream tore through the air, coming from above. We looked up and there she was. Standing on the widow's walk with her back to us was Cassandra. She was backing up, moving toward the railing.

"Cassandra!" Jeremy called up to her. "What are you doing?"

She didn't turn or answer but seemed to be staring at something before her. But she was alone up there. I peered up into the dark and realized my mistake. No, she wasn't. There was something else up there with her.

"Jesus," whispered Duke. "Look at that. Put the camera on, quick."

A vague, white form seemed to be taking shape on the widow's walk. It looked like a shadowy mist against the darkness that curled and coiled and rose up in front of Cassandra. As we watched a tendril of this white stuff drifted toward Cassandra. It was impossible but it looked like a hand, reaching out for the girl.

Cassandra let out another low cry and backed up again, slowly, until she was right up against the railing. "What?" we heard her say. "No. Get away from me."

It was a strange scene. It seemed unreal and we all stood frozen, watching and listening. Even Cassandra's voice didn't sound like her own, it sounded frail and vulnerable, like a little girl's. But what was stranger still was that it sounded like she was talking to the thing.

"No. I won't, now go away," she cried out, louder now.

"It's her," croaked Jeremy's hoarse voice next to me. "It's the

woman in white.”

“Keep the camera on it,” hissed Duke.

“Is that a face?” I heard one of the cameramen whisper.

“Quiet down, Cassandra,” said Duke in a stage whisper through his cupped hands. “You’ll scare her away.”

Cassandra gave no sign that she had heard Duke. She was leaning back against the railing, her arms raised up in front of her body as the thick, white mist drifted closer and closer.

“Cassandra!” yelled Jeremy. He bolted toward the house.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. I was fumbling around, calling for a searchlight. At the same time I was aware of Duke following Jeremy up to the front door and into the house. A moment later there was a sickening creak then a loud snap. And I watched, horrified, as Cassandra tumbled down, screaming from the second floor to land with a terrible smacking noise on the bricks below us.

It was all on tape. Cassandra on the widow’s walk. The woman in white. The camera had even captured Cassandra’s eyes as she spun around in terror at the last moment, probably feeling the railing give way. On film her eyes had that eerie soulless, dead-black quality that the night vision film imparts.

But the worst part of it was something that could never be captured on film. The worst part was what faced us there in the darkness in those wretched few minutes after she fell: it was the awful stillness of Cassandra’s body. She was dead; I knew before I ever checked for a pulse or saw the flattened area of her temple where her skull had been crushed. She was dead and her body had a terrible, glaring emptiness of a broken vessel. The life was poured out of her. There was only stillness.

“So you came out here first.”

It was hours later. The unshaven police detective looked as tired as the rest of us and he had asked me these same questions half a dozen times. “But everyone was out here just before she fell?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I heard her cry out. From where I was standing it sounded like it had come from outside. Everyone heard it. We were all standing here when we saw her. We called up to her but she didn’t answer us, just kept backing up toward the railing,” I said. “It must have been loose?” I added.

The detective didn’t answer my implied question. “And this thing that

you saw,” he sniffed. “You think that scared her enough to back into the railing and fall?”

“That’s what it looked like, yes.”

“Two people ran inside just before she fell,” he said, reading over his notes.

“Jeremy ran inside, yes, and then Duke followed. But neither of them would have had time to get up there before... before it happened,” I said.

“So.” He looked at me speculatively. “You think a ghost is responsible for Cassandra Jewett’s death?” To my surprise, he said this without any hint of sarcasm.

“I didn’t say that,” I said coldly. “May I go now?”

“I guess so,” he said with a shrug. “There wasn’t much for the forensics team. I think they’re through. You’ll have to leave your equipment for now, and all the film.”

“I understand.”

I made my way through the house that was now fully lit, like an arcade, and looked for my jacket and keys. They were both on the kitchen counter. I looked around. The only thing of ours that I could see was a thermos of coffee sitting on the stove top. The cover was off and the coffee had gone cold long ago. The napkin and the stove top were both splattered with brown stains. The side of the thermos was all wet too. Then I remembered Duke had been getting coffee. He had certainly made quite a mess. I was about to clean up but stopped. What did it matter? The owners weren’t going to mind a little spilled coffee when there was blood and... worse on the walk outside.

I walked up to the third floor. The recording equipment was all still there. We had played everything for the police but I had to see it one more time. I played back the video from Edwina Pembroke’s room. I watched the hour or so before the accident, skipping through to where Jeremy and Cassandra were sitting at the small table near the window, talking. I turned up the audio. Jeremy was talking:

“...about then. Anyway yeah, I’m pretty cool with that. So I’m gonna go get the camera guys and we’ll do the outside. Wait for me, yeah?” Then Jeremy left.

I watched as Duke came in and gave Cassandra a cup of coffee. Cassandra sipped at it as Duke reached out and tousled her hair. Neither of them spoke. Duke turned in the doorway and watched her for a moment, then left.

The tape kept playing. Cassandra, sitting at the table, looking

bored. Suddenly she stood up and went to the window. Here I paused the image and peered at the screen. What was she doing? Her hand was on the door handle and her head was slightly cocked to one side. It looked to me like she was listening to something. She stood there for some time. I looked at the time counter, almost two and a half minutes. A long time for someone to stand motionless. Maybe she had heard something and was standing there, listening to hear it again.

I backed up and turned the audio as loud as I could. Nothing. But then, just before she opened the door, I thought there was something. I played it back again. Yes, there it was, a vague, low-pitched murmuring noise, almost like hissing. Then Cassandra went outside and shut the door behind her. That was all that could be seen until just a few seconds later, the scream.

I reviewed the tapes from outside as well. It was just as I remembered. It was dark but you could clearly see Cassandra with her back to the camera. The vague white shape rose up and pointed at her. When I looked at it again I noticed that there was something odd about the way Cassandra was moving. Her movements seemed slow and strangely mechanical for someone who was terrified. I didn't know what to make of it.

Duke came and found me just before he left.

"You okay?" said Duke.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Poor kid," he shook his head. "I think she knew something was going to happen you know? She must have had some kind of premonition."

I stared at him, "What are you talking about?"

"You know, when she first came into the house? She knew something was gonna happen. Then she saw the woman in white," he said. "You saw it, Harold, we all saw it. And now we have proof." He nodded and said, "Documented proof of an actual spirit. Isn't that what you've always wanted?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

The police didn't find anything to suggest foul play. The railing had been the original wood, but sturdy enough and without any signs of tampering. It seemed that she had just pushed hard against a weak spot and it had given way. Everything pointed to Cassandra Jewett's death being an accident. As for what was recorded from down below,

the police dismissed the white form on the widow's walk as being fog or sea mist.

After two days we were allowed to take our equipment back. Duke wanted to go over the film together right away. I said I would sit in, but I really didn't want to watch it all again.

"But you've got to," Duke insisted. "We've got to do the editing and do a script for the narration. People are gonna be blown away when they see this footage."

I stared at him. "You can't be serious," I said. "We can't show that on TV."

A look of calculation came into Duke's eyes and he gave me a slap on the shoulder that was harder than usual. "Maybe we can't, Harold, but I definitely can. And I think I could handle the show without you now, if you feel like backing out. Maybe you're getting a little too old for ghost hunting." He smiled and his lop-sided grin suddenly seemed malicious. "Or maybe this has got you scared. Is that it, Harold? Are you scared of ghosts?"

I looked at Duke Dennis and said slowly, "I don't believe in ghosts."

And I didn't. Maybe it had taken this tragedy for me to realize it. I didn't believe in ghosts and I had wasted my life so far to prove it. All because of a silly childhood incident. I had slogged over every clammy graveyard, photographed every tarnished mirror and dust mote, recorded every creaky door and interviewed every idiot with a ghost story from L.A. to Charleston. And nothing, nada. And now a girl was dead. Just so we could have some television footage for some moron to gawk at over their night time nachos. And they were going to tell me a ghost was responsible? I don't think so.

I went back to Pembroke House and convinced Bob and Marcie to let me take one more look around. I went upstairs. There had to be something I missed. I hesitated for a minute, standing where Cassandra had stood, at the French doors. I stood listening for a long time; I guess I was waiting to hear that low, eerie murmuring that had called her out into the dark. There was nothing.

Something about that noise had bothered me. It didn't sound like anything human yet there was something familiar about it. I went outside. Just as before, I braced my back against the outer wall of the house. Swallowing down my vertigo, I went along, hunched over,

clutching at the newly repaired railing and trying not to see the dizzying view of the bricks below. I searched every inch of the white, sun bleached boards until I got to the end, right where the woman in white had made her appearance. I didn't find anything. I straightened up. Well, what had I expected? A pool of drying ectoplasm maybe, complete with foot prints? There was nothing to see. I turned around to face the house. And that was when I found what I had been looking for.

Marcie and Bob were sitting in the kitchen when I came down.

"We're real sorry about what happened," said Marcie. "It was just terrible. I... I don't even know if I want to stay here anymore." She gave Bob a worried look.

"You can stay," I said. I turned my back on them and left without explaining.

When I got back to my hotel there was a message from Jeremy. They had completed the autopsy on Cassandra's body and had found something unexpected.

"She was pregnant?" I repeated.

"Yeah," said Jeremy. He rubbed at his eyes and then folded his skinny arms around his chest. "She just told me the day before. That's why she wasn't feeling too good. When we first went into the house and she ran out? She threw up right in the rose bushes out front."

"Well... who...?"

Jeremy swept a sideways glance at me and his pale skin got little paler under his freckles. He shrugged. "She said it was Duke's."

"Might it have been yours?"

There was a long silence. Finally Jeremy hung his head down and gave a quick shake 'no.' When he did speak again he still didn't look at me and his voice was a shaky whisper. "She just wanted to be special. That's why she did the stuff she did." Jeremy's voice went up a notch, "Duke didn't understand anything about her. He didn't care. Not like—" He broke off and licked his lips.

He looked miserable. And I couldn't think of anything to say to make it better. Finally I stood up. "There wasn't any ghost, you know. It was just a trick. For the show."

He lifted up his head. He had started to cry and now wiped the back of his hand across his dripping nose. "Yeah, I know," he said.

* * * * *

I banged on Duke Dennis' hotel room door until he came and answered it, bleary-eyed.

"I know how you did it," I said.

"Come on in, Harold," Duke said, waving me inside. "Did Jeremy tell you?"

"No, I had already figured it out." I said. "I found a small exhaust vent set in the wall up on the widow's walk. I missed it the first time I went up there, I had my back to it."

Duke laughed. "Poor Harold." He looked around the beer bottles on the coffee table until he found one with something in it, took a swig and then grinned. "I thought you were gonna piss yourself when you went out on that catwalk. Man, were you green."

I ignored this and went on. "The vent is connected to the hood over the kitchen stove. You turned on the fan over the stove first. Cassandra heard it come on outside, that was her cue to go out." The noise of the exhaust fan was what I had heard faintly on the video.

"Then you put a chunk of dry ice in the coffee thermos on the stove top. Combined with liquid, it created a cloud of white smoke. The fan sucked the vapor up and out, onto the widow's walk."

"You got it," said Duke, pointing the mouth of the bottle at me.

A parlor trick, I thought. And it wouldn't have fooled anybody, except for the fact that it was dark and Cassandra was there, doing a very convincing act that she was seeing a ghost. The power of suggestion. That was why her movements had looked odd and slow. She was acting for the cameras. The whole thing had been choreographed.

"Everybody was in on it?" I asked.

Duke shrugged. "We all wanted the show to go on."

"Did you really think that no one would figure it out?"

"Well, sure, eventually but it's just show business, right?"

"No," I said softly. "Not to me it isn't."

Duke sighed, "You're a nice guy, Harold. That's your problem. That's why you're never gonna get anywhere in this world."

I wasn't even listening to him anymore, but I had to know, "When you ran inside you weren't even going in to help Cassandra. You went in to shut off the fan."

Duke shrugged. "I didn't know that she was gonna fall. She was just supposed to put on a show, act scared. How could I have known that railing would give out? It was an accident."

I knew it was true. It had been a stupid accident. But it didn't have

to happen.

"Did you know she was pregnant with your baby?" I asked him.

Duke looked uncomfortable. "She told me that just before we started shooting." He shook his head. "But that kind of girl, Harold." Duke gave me a knowing leer. "It could have been anybody's, you know what I'm saying?"

Then, because Jeremy wasn't there to do it, or maybe just because I wanted to, I punched Duke Dennis as hard as I could. I'm not used to fighting and I had to aim high but I did land my fist on something that gave way with a satisfying crack. Duke staggered back, holding his bloody mouth. And I left.

The last time I saw Duke Dennis was back in New York, at the same coffee shop. He actually seemed happy to see me and didn't seem to hold a grudge about the punch. But he didn't look good. Duke had purplish bags under his eyes and his tan had taken on a sallow tinge.

"I haven't been sleeping too well, Harold," he said. "Seems like it's been one bad real estate deal after another these days. And the donut shops...." He drew both hands over his face. "Man, is everybody on the planet cutting carbs?"

Suddenly he broke off and sniffed the air. It was late morning and we were the only customers. "Somebody's smoking in here," he muttered. "I can smell it."

I told Duke why I had asked to meet him.

"They're canceling the show. Frank wanted me to let you know in person." Duke nodded and we finished our breakfast in silence.

When we walked out he asked me, "So what are you gonna do now, Harold?"

"I don't know. Find a real job, I guess."

We were standing next to the Range Rover.

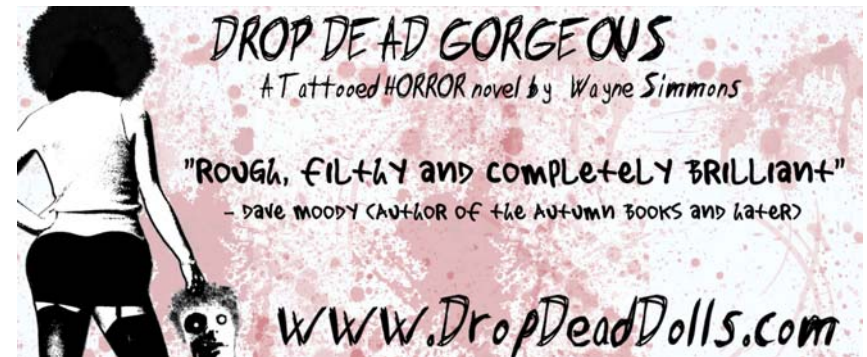
"You kept the plates, I see."

"Hey, why not?" said Duke with a flash of his old grin, though it struck me as more of a nervous twitch now. He got in and drove away as I stared after him.

Why not? I thought to myself. It occurred to me that the HAUNTSQD plates were very appropriate and that Duke Dennis would probably smell the faint scent of clove cigarettes for a long time to come. I knew because I could see through the back window and into the seat right behind him. It was filled with a beautiful, golden light,

shimmering in Technicolor brilliance. And a black haired girl with sad, hungry eyes who turned and looked at me. Cassandra Jewitt might not have been eye-catching before. As a ghost she was heart-stopping.

Suddenly, the world was full of possibilities again. I patted my jacket. I wondered where I had put Frank's phone number. ●



A TALE OF TWO WIZARDS

Larry Hodges

On a blazing hot Tuesday afternoon five thousand years ago, Zuku, the #1 wizard in the world, stood at the front of his army and stared across the field at the army of Death. The skull-like face of the wizard Death stared back with blazing red eyes. Zuku turned and faced his ten thousand men.

"My warriors, you have followed me into battle throughout the world. We started with nothing and look at us now! Five thousand years from now people will tell the tale of your valor and great victory. Today we fight for *honor and glory!*"

He raised the gleaming enchanted sword Chaos, yelled "Charge!" and raced into the field.

None of his men followed.

Zuku slowed to a trot, then a walk, then stopped.

"*Sonny, you're making a fool of yourself!*" The crackling female voice came from a small animated mouth at the base of his sword.

Zuku's bright blue cape billowed out behind him as he turned. His scalp was hairless and weather-beaten from countless hours in the sun. He still held Chaos, only now he let it drag in the dirt behind him as he walked back toward his troops.

"*Don't you dare drag me in the dirt!*" the voice from Chaos said.

"Shut up, Mom," Zuku said. He waved a hand at the sword. The tiny mouth closed. Gagging sounds came out. It had been a mistake to allow his mom to animate his sword when she died.

He glanced over at the south hill, where reporters for the Neanderthal Broadcasting Corporation, with their protruding brows and low sloping foreheads, watched and took notes. He'd made another mistake in resurrecting such a busybody species as the Neanderthals, with their absurd ranking lists and glamorized stories. NBC smoke signals floated into the air, to be picked up by nearby affiliate stations as the news traveled around the world.

The whole world watched, eyes glued to the sky, trying to catch

every puff of action between the commercials. It promised to be an epic ratings day for NBC.

Sighing, he faced his men, hands on hips, squinting in the bright sunshine. His men milled about with sheepish grins. None made eye contact with him. The intense smell of sweat and treachery nauseated him.

"Okay, men, what happened?" he asked, projecting his voice to the farthest corners of his army. When no one answered, he singled one out. "General?"

General Horon, his trusted second in command, carefully inspected his spit-cleaned sandals. His ankle-length golden beard and hair got in the way. Horon spent an hour each morning grooming his prized tresses, the only groomed hair in an army of bedraggled soldiers. His thin frame towered over the others. When he moved, the medals across his chest jingled against his bright red robe.

Zuku let the silence build. At last, Horon could take no more. "Well, you see, it's like this. Last night Death came by and sort of made a deal with us. You know, higher pay, more benefits, health insurance, the usual stuff."

Zuku stood directly in front of Horon and glared at him. "You made a deal with Death?"

"He offered training courses and rapid advancement!"

"You're second in command here. If you work for Death, how can you advance higher than that?"

"Well, there is that," Horon admitted. "But he offered Comprehensive Life Insurance! Dental! A pension plan! And—"

Zuku smoothly thrust Chaos through Horon's belly, then released the sword. Blood spurted as Horon fell to the ground, sword protruding.

"Dash it!" Horon said, brushing himself as he got up. "That hurt! And you splashed blood on my beard!"

Zuku stared down at the intersection of Horon and Chaos. "Why are you still alive?"

"Well, sir... we sort of... um... gave him our souls," Horon said. "You know, in trade so that we couldn't die." Horon absentmindedly jangled one of his medals against the sword. "I'd appreciate it if you'd take that out. It stings. And I'll need some hydrogen peroxide to wash out the blood stains. Got any?"

Zuku withdrew his sword from Horon's body. He'd given Horon his first fencing lessons. He still had the scar on his chest from the time

Horon had gotten past his defenses. And now this man, and the rest of his army, abandoned him for some trickster's promise of immortality? How gullible were they?

He knew the stories about Death, the world's #2 wizard in the NBC rankings. He felt a responsibility to mankind, as the world's #1 wizard, to make sure Death never ascended to #1 and dominated the world. How bad would that be!

One of Death's victims had been Zuku's dad. Zuku did not know the details, but he'd been told that the two had battled and Death had won. He had fond memories of his dad teaching him the basics of magic.

His jaw tightened in resolve.

He raised his voice again. "OK, men, so this is how it's going to be. Go to your new master! Forget how I fed you, clothed you, taught you the basics of killing, maiming and righting wrongs! Go! *Now!*"

Sheepishly, under Zuku's glare, his men trudged across the field to join Death's army of eight thousand.

One man stayed behind.

"I'm with you, sir!" cried Warrior Third Class Private Jukey. "I didn't make any deal with Death, sir!"

"Wonderful," said Zuku. "Well, then, let's get on with it. Um, my warriors—warrior—you have followed me—"

"Sir, you already gave your pep talk, sir," Jukey said. "Honor, glory, five thousand years from now and so forth, sir."

"Right," Zuku said. "Men, I mean man, for honor and glory, charge!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Zuku and Jukey charged across the field.

Death and eighteen thousand warriors charged back.

NBC smoke signals shot into the air.

Poor Jukey was cut to pieces before he could so much as blurt another "sir."

Zuku went to work, along with his now ungagged mom, who kept Chao's edge as sharp as her own taunting wit.

"Sonny, watch out, clumsy boy, ha, got 'em! He looks like a baboon with its head cut off, cuz his head is cut off! Ha! That one thought to kick my boy, now he's been defeated, how's he like hobblin' on his ankles! Ha! That one there, he's squirtin' blood like Sonny when he wets his bed! Ha!"

"Mom, will you shut up and let me concentrate!"

Whirling Chaos about and shouting spells, he beheaded, stabbed, froze, burned and squashed many dozens of men. He would fight his way to Death and then have it out, wizard to wizard.

It wasn't until he found himself surrounded by headless, stabbed, frozen, burned and squashed bodies, still fighting valiantly, that he realized the problem. No matter how many heads, arms and legs he lopped off, they kept coming at him. Disembodied heads swore as they bit at him. Wriggling arms slapped at his feet.

"Me gads!" his mom screamed. *"It's day of the dead living! Get your dear 'ole mommy out of here, Sonny, before they eat our livers!"*

Distracted by his mom and his battle with Death's army, Zuku almost didn't see Death's sudden attack. Death used no sword. Power swirled from his fingertips while his black robes billowed in the wind. Waves of heat and cold shot at Zuku, which he blocked while continuing to pummel Death's army.

A giant set of jaws appeared and thrust at him—the infamous Jaws of Death. Pointed teeth and saliva flew as he slashed it to pieces.

As Zuku finished off the Jaws of Death, he was distracted by a group of charging soldiers, and didn't see the giant skeletal foot come down out of the sky, pinning him to the ground on his back and knocking Chaos out of his hands. Waves of power flew from Death's fingertips, tying Zuku up in yellow lines of force. The jaws and skeletal foot slowly dissipated into the air. Death's men surrounded him, and thirty sword tips jabbed at his throat and belly. Chaos lay on the ground nearby.

"Sonny, I tell you to run away, but do you listen to your dear 'ole mom? No—"

"Mom—" Zuku began.

"No, with NBC there, you just had to fight that silly army and that big foot that almost went in your mouth, even when—"

"Will you *shut up*, mom!" Zuku exclaimed. He needed to think.

"Why, I never—shut up, you say? OK, sonny, I'll shut up—for good! You..." The tiny mouth closed to a tight line that ended in a down-turned frown. Then it dissolved away. The gleaming silver surface of Chaos took on a pale brown complexion.

Relieved, Zuku looked about. The sweating Neanderthals sent up smoke signals as glamorized versions of Zuku's defeat raced around the world. Past interviews with the new hero, Death, puffed into the air while Zuku's reputation also went up in smoke. Ratings skyrocketed.

Death and his new number two, a rather sheepish General Horon, stood over him.

Zuku stared at Horon, whose eyes were downcast. In a low voice he said, "Someday you will pay for this."

"I doubt that," Death said. "Like your father, I have defeated you in combat. You know what this means?"

"You'll be the new #1 in the wizard rankings," Zuku said. "Now every small-bit wizard with a sword and a dream will be going after you instead of me. Welcome to Hell!"

"Actually, I meant that with you out of the way, *I alone* will rule the world!" he cried.

"With our help, of course," said Horon.

Death put his hands on his head, looked into the sky and opened his mouth. Hysterical laughter came out. The gust of rancid wind knocked hundreds of men off their feet. Somewhere a wolf howled.

"That doesn't sound too good," Horon said, lowering his voice as he regained his feet.

"Did it ever occur to you that selling your soul to a wizard called Death might not be a good idea?" Zuku asked.

"You've got a point," Horon said. "When the deal was done all ten thousand of our souls flew into one of his fingers. That's when I realized maybe we should have thought this through a bit more. Now we have to do whatever he says."

Death stopped laughing and caught his breath. He picked up Chaos and did a few experimental thrusts. "It looked a lot better before," he said. "Why'd it turn brown?"

Death looked about and motioned for a soldier to approach. "Look at that!" Death said, pointing at the ground. When the soldier looked down, Death tried lopping off his head. The blade hit the man's neck and stopped. The enchanted Chaos had lost its edge. Death studied Chaos and its brown, dull edge as the soldier ran away screaming. "Interesting." Shrugging his shoulders, Death handed the sword to Horon, who stuck it in his belt. "Put this in storage. Now, to business."

He pulled an Australopithecine cigar from his robes, lighting it with a snap of his fingers. Puffing away, he examined a sheet of paper with a list:

- ~~1. Trick Zuku's army into joining me.~~
- ~~2. Groceries~~
3. Defeat Zuku in combat.

4. Kill Zuku.

5. Enslave world.

He carefully crossed off item three. "Time for number four," he said, grinning at his warriors. "*Kill him!*"

The thirty warriors thrust their swords at Zuku's body. As if meeting an invisible shield, the swords all broke or slipped aside. The warriors dropped their swords in disgust and pummeled him with their fists, again to no effect.

"I'll have to do this myself!" Death said. He waved a hand at Zuku, a simple lightning spell. Zuku was unaffected. Death went through his repertoire, even calling up another Jaws of Death, but to no avail.

"You're not the only one who knows an invulnerability spell," Zuku said. "You can't kill me." Not as long as he kept his focus, anyway.

"That's a strong spell," Death admitted, taking a deep puff on the cigar. "My version makes the person immortal, but doesn't protect him like yours. Takes a while for the parts to grow back." He glanced at a group of warriors with an assortment of missing body parts and various degrees of agony. "I'll give you leniency if you teach me your version."

"Sure," Zuku said. "You'll have to free one of my hands."

Death waved a finger and the yellow line of force holding Zuku's right hand disappeared.

Zuku extended a specific finger at Death, which roughly translated meant, *Why don't you glop with a donkey?* NBC quickly broadcast this around the world.

Death's skull-white face turned red as he reattached the line of force. "Then spend eternity imprisoned!" He pulled out of his robes a small green corked bottle covered with fine print. "Blast! Left my reading glasses in the lab!"

"Allow me, sir," said Horon. Death handed him the bottle and Horon began to read. "Warning: Use of this product can lead to birth defects in pregnant wizards."

"Not the warning label!" Death exclaimed. "The instructions, man, read the instructions!"

"Sorry!" Horon read the proper instructions for turning a wizard into a genie in a bottle, trying to ignore Zuku's steady glare.

Death went through the incantations. With a final hand motion, Zuku turned into smoke. Death motioned the smoke into the bottle and corked it. Inside the bottle, Zuku solidified into a tiny figure glaring out the transparent sides. Horon put the cork on the bottle and held it up.

"You'll be in there forever!" Death exclaimed.

"Actually, not really, sir," said Horon. "You see, there's the genie clause. If someone frees him from the bottle, and Zuku grants him a wish, he'll be free. It's right here in the fine print."

"I'll take your word for it. But it doesn't matter—I'll release him in the middle of the Great Ocean, where he'll *never* be found!" Once again hysterical laughter emitted from the mouth of Death. Eighteen thousand men fell back in horror even before the gusts of wind blasted them off their feet.

After doing a round of interview with NBC, where he brandished Zuku's bottle like a flag, Death left for his sea voyage. A few weeks later he pitched the bottle overboard.

"Zuku?" a very surprised sea turtle asked itself as it peered at the sinking bottle. It excitedly followed the bottle downward. For this was no ordinary sea turtle. This was a former wizard named Zak who'd long ago lost a magical battle with Death and been transformed into its current state. The three wishes from the genie Zuku would have solved Zak's problems and freed Zuku if it were not for the great white shark swimming by that swallowed the turtle whole.

Five thousand years went by.

Otis shuffled along the seashore on a hot summer day, enjoying the scenic view and the cool, salty breeze on his mottled skin. He was oblivious to the waves crashing on shore, the screeching of gulls and the faint cries of "Help!" coming from nearby. He carried a sack filled with jostling glass bottles.

He saw the small green bottle. He did not hear the cries for help coming from it as he placed it in his bag. At the end of the day, Otis dropped his bottles off at the Poca-Cola plant, where they would be melted down and recycled. He received a small payment.

Later that day he waded in the ocean in pursuit of more bottles when the oldest great white shark in the world, kept alive by an oasis of magic coming from its stomach where the oldest sea turtle in the world was trapped, swallowed him whole.

Zuku stopped yelling for help and went back to glowering. He hoped the guy who'd picked up his bottle would someday get swallowed by a shark, along with Death and Horon.

Except for a disgusting incident with a giant squid's digestive track

three thousand years ago, his bottle had lain quietly on the ocean's floor for five thousand boring years before washing ashore. Now it lay in a large bin with dozens of other bottles.

The bin upended and the bottles poured out, banging him against the walls and giving him a headache.

A few seconds later he was hit by unimaginably searing heat. He screamed. His invulnerability field had weakened over the centuries, and the heat seeped through. In agony, he saw his bottle melt away. The vat of molten glassware tilted and the contents poured into another vat. Everything should have melted down and any contaminants should have been filtered out. However, the machine wasn't designed to filter out small, nearly invulnerable humanoid figures screaming in agony.

The molten glass poured into a pipe, carrying the small humanoid figure, now unconscious, to the main bottle-making area of the factory. The refreshing scent of Poca-Cola, the world's #1 soft drink, filled the air.

When Zuku awoke, he felt like 18,000 men had stomped on his head and body. He tried to stretch but something held him.

He was inside a blue bottle nearly full of a bubbling liquid with a surprisingly refreshing scent. His head jutted out just above the liquid line.

His right arm and leg were embedded in the walls of the bottle. He wiggled his arm and leg, but there was no give. He tried magic, but something in the bottle repelled this--some part of his previous bottle must be in it. Sighing, he gave up. The next 5000 years looked to be a bit more uncomfortable than the previous 5000.

He set about refreshing his invulnerability field.

The old man at the desk was fairly sure he was thirsty. It was hard for him to tell as his parched throat was always dry, which helped keep his mind off his body, which was always hurting.

With the aid of a cane, he slowly rose to his feet to the sound of bone rubbing on bone. He was tall and thin, with medals jingling on the front of his business suit. Leaning on a cane, he made for the Poke Machine around the corner.

He came to a stop. He strained to move forward, but something held him back. Turning, he saw his snow white beard was tangled again. He sighed and slowly returned to his desk. He untangled his

beard from his chair, then started his journey to the Poke machine anew, thirty-foot beard trailing behind on the floor.

When he finally arrived, he felt about his business suit for change. “Dash it all, I can’t believe he makes us pay for our own drinks!” Slowly he returned to his desk. He sighed. It just wasn’t worth it. Maybe he wasn’t thirsty after all.

“But I sure wish I had an ice-cold bottle of Poke!” he muttered.

An ice cold bottle of Poke appeared on his desk.

The old man stared at the blue bottle through his quarter-inch thick spectacles. He ran his hand over the single strand of white hair that remained on his head.

The bottle hadn’t been there before, he was sure of it. Yet there it was.

The old man opened the Poke bottle and prepared to drink deeply. Before it reached his lips, a motion caught his eye. A tiny man was waving an arm at him from the mouth of the bottle.

Horon dropped the bottle.

The bottle hit the floor and broke into a dozen pieces. Horon heard a tiny “*Ow!*”

Among the pieces was the tiny man stumbling about on his hands and knees. The man began to grow. In a few seconds he was human-sized.

Zuku rubbed his right arm and leg, now freed from the glass. He shivered in his Poke-drenched robe.

With a few words and a wave of his hand, his robe dried out, although the refreshing Poke scent remained. He looked about, somewhat wild eyed, like a man who’d been stuck in a bottle for five thousand years. The Poke scent almost covered the smell of a man who hadn’t bathed that entire time.

“Who the dash are you?” the old man asked, peering through his spectacles. Then the seven remaining hairs in his eyebrows rose in recognition. “Zuku? *Is that you?*” He rose to his feet.

Zuku examined the feeble old man. “General Horon! What happened to you!” Five thousand years of bottled rage shot to the surface, and a death spell raced to the tips of his fingers—but something stopped him. He was a genie. He couldn’t harm his master.

Yet.

“I got old. But what were you doing in my Poke? And how do you speak English?”

“A genie has to be able to understand his master so he can grant his wishes,” Zuku said, hiding his rage. His time would come. “It’s automatic, and I can read and write it now. How did you learn English?”

“I’ve been here a while.” Horon adjusted his spectacles, then froze, the spectacles falling back down his nose. “Did you just call me your master?”

“You opened my bottle. It’s not the one Death put me in, but part of it seems to be and so the spell still holds. You let me out, so I’m yours until I’ve granted you three wishes. And you’ve had one.” Just two more...

Horon thought hard. “What wish? I didn’t make any wish!”

“You wished for a Poke to drink.”

Horon thought even harder. This didn’t make sense to him. “But I didn’t even have the bottle then, so you weren’t my genie yet. How could you grant wishes to someone who wasn’t your master yet?”

“Do you really wish to know?” Zuku asked, eyebrows raised.

“Of course, that’s why I asked!”

“It was a retroactive wish. And that’s two wishes now. If you wish, I can teach you cause and effect in magic.”

“*What!* I didn’t mean that as a wish! I want those two wishes back!”

“Sorry, can’t do that. I asked if it was a wish and you said yes.”

Horon thought long and hard on this. “OK, I’ve got one more wish and then you’re free. Right?”

“Right. And then I’ve got a couple of scores to settle.”

The poor man tossed aside his cane and fell to his knees. “Then settle it now! I wish you to kill me! I betrayed you and deserve to die! Please, kill me, kill me now!” Horon buried his head in Zuku’s leg.

This was what Zuku had waited for. Death for Horon, and then death for Death. With barely a thought, a bolt of lightning shot from his fingers, striking Horon in the chest.

Horon was unharmed.

Zuku shot several more bolts to no avail.

“Dammit!” Zuku and Horon said together. Horon fell to the ground, sobbing at Zuku’s feet.

This was not how Zuku had pictured his vengeance. Shouldn’t Horon be sobbing because he was going to die, not because he couldn’t die?

What had this man gone through these five thousand years that

made him want to die so badly?

He sighed deeply. *We're both victims.* A huge pressure inside him relaxed.

"For centuries I've dreamed of killing you, taking my revenge. But you've been punished enough." He gently pulled Horon to his feet. "You're not the one I want."

"But I *want* to die! I still have one wish, and I order you to try to kill me!"

"Are you certain you want to make that your final wish?"

"Absolutely!"

Zuku shrugged. He had no choice. He assaulted Horon with heat, cold, lightning, pummeled him with boulders, and ripped at him with every imaginable pointed surface. Throughout, Horon yelped in pain, but would not die.

Zuku sighed. "Death made you immortal and I can't overcome that. You are what is known as 'The Living Dead.' As you wished, I tried to kill you. So that's your third wish."

"But that's not fair! I'm still alive, and everything hurts! My feet hurt, my legs hurt, my back hurts, my neck hurts, my arms hurt, my head hurts, my—"

Zuku waved his hand at Horon and the general's mouth snapped closed. "Just shut up and listen! OK?"

Horon nodded, and Zuku released the mouth-sealing spell.

"And I still hurt from you putting Chaos through me!" Zuku raised his hand again, but Horon quickly said, "OK, OK, I'll shut up. What do you want?"

"Is Death in there?" he asked, pointing at the door to an inner office. The nameplate said "DEATH."

"Not now. He's out all afternoon at meetings. But you have to promise to try to find a way to kill us all! Really kill us!"

"All? Who are the others?"

"Why, the members of Death's army, and yours! Remember?"

"How many are still around?"

Horon began coughing, hoarsely at first, then stronger and stronger. Zuku realized he was laughing. "All of 'em!"

"What do you mean?"

"All eighteen thousand of us. We're the employees of Death Incorporated. We get the cover of AARP Magazine almost every month!"

Zuku took a step back in shock. All eighteen thousand were still

alive?

Horon continued. "You should see our pension plans! But Death won't let us retire. And he won't let us die. All that life insurance he gave us..."

"If dying is what you want, I will find a way!" Zuku vowed. "Now let's check out his office." He paused at Death's door, then entered, followed by Horon.

"Dash it all!" Horon exclaimed as the door shut on his beard.

The office was a treasure trove of art. Zuku was transfixed by such works as Frederick Hart's bronze sculpture *Ex Nihilo* ("Used in the movie *The Devil's Advocate*," Horon explained, whatever that meant) and Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (the original, according to Horon). A huge maple desk sat in the middle. Off to the side was a swimming pool and a putting green. The office smelled of disinfectants. The walls and ceiling were painted black.

Chaos hung on the wall behind the desk.

"Mom!" Zuku said as he took the sword down. The blade was rusted through. "Are you there, Mom?"

"Death's been trying to figure what happened to it for five thousand years," Horon said. "I believe you told her to 'shut up.'"

"I told my mom to shut up?"

"Vehemently so."

Zuku examined the sword. "Mom, I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"... *stupid excuse for a son, tells me to shut up, does he?*" The tiny mouth worked at double speed as if to make up for the five-thousand-year break. "*So I shut up, like he says, but does he call or write? No, he—*"

"Mom!" The sword stopped talking, its mouth wide open. The blade once again gleamed silver. "Mom, I'm so glad to see you!"

The tiny mouth grinned. "*Sonny! You do care! So, now that we're back to old times, this is what I want you to do. First—*"

Zuku waved his hand at the sword. Mom's voice changed to gagging sounds. Zuku stuck Chaos in his belt. Feeling complete, he turned to Horon.

"So how has the world changed in five thousand years? I remember there were reports of new super weapons, like that bow and arrow thing. How did that work out?"

Horon stood speechless.

"Never mind, I'll find out myself," Zuku said. He'd spend the afternoon exploring this future world.

Zuku had a busy afternoon.

He defeated numerous automobiles and a bright yellow school bus in open combat.

He overpowered an incoming jet at JFK airport.

He caught lunch at the Central Park Zoo.

He bathed in the ocean. When a huge great white shark attacked him, he sent the giant monster flying onto the shore, its long life finally over.

After a few more hours of exploring he returned to the offices of Death. While picking his teeth with Chaos and ignoring his mom's outraged cries, he found a number of paper flyers about the company near the entrance, which he read over.

Death Incorporated, with eighteen thousand employees, was headquartered in New York City in The Trump World Tower. It traded at 137 and a quarter on the stock market. Overlooking the U.N. building and rising above Manhattan and the East River, the 72-floor tower had been one of the most luxurious residential towers in the world when Death had bought it out in a hostile takeover, firing the previous owner, Donald Trump.

"He's not back yet," Horon said when Zuku returned. "But you have, um, a visitor."

"A visitor?" Zuku furrowed his brow. "Who would be visiting me?"

"Perhaps you'd better ask him yourself." Horon pointed. Watching from across the room was a large sea turtle.

"Zuku?" the sea turtle asked. "Is that really you?"

"Who or what are you?" Zuku asked.

"It's me, Zak! Your dad!"

The two stared at each other. "Dad? I thought Death killed you!"

"Nope, just turned me into this. Saw you got trapped in a bottle five thousand years ago. I got stuck in a shark myself. The thing went ashore and died this afternoon. I had to dig myself and this tramp guy out of its body."

Zuku kneeled down to embrace the turtle. "Father!"

"Son!"

A gagging sound interrupted them.

"Oh, and dad! I've got mom!" Zuku drew Chaos and ungagged her.

After several minutes of high-pitched lecturing, Zuku got his mom's attention. "Mom, Dad's here!"

"Where?"

"Over here, honey." Sword and turtle faced each other for the first time in five thousand years. "It's me!"

Soon sword and turtle were locked in a loving embrace, whispering sweet words of affection.

"Perhaps we should adjourn to Death's office to await his return?" Horon said.

Once there, Zuku turned to Horon. "What do you all do here?"

"Officially or unofficially?"

"Both."

Horon shook his head. "I don't think I could explain to you our official business, which involves crooked investments and insider trading."

"And unofficially?"

"Death controls everything. He uses blackmail to control every major leader in the world. He kills and tortures people in his free time."

"Yet, with all this power, you want to die?"

"Power?" Horon began his coughing laugh again. "We have no power. All eighteen thousand of us would give our lives if we could just die."

"Then call them here."

"All eighteen thousand?"

"Let's try one hundred."

Death entered his office.

"Hello, old friend," Zuku said from Death's desk, Chaos in hand and smoking a cigar. "I found the Australopithecine cigars in your desk. They aged nicely!"

Death grinned and nodded. "So you've returned from your ocean vacation." Like his employees, Death had changed—only for the better. Zuku barely recognized him. Only the blazing red eyes were a dead giveaway. His skeletal face looked almost human.

Seeing Zuku's stare, Death turned his head side to side, showing off both sides. "Plastic surgery. You'd be amazed at the stuff they can do these days." Death's green and red striped shirt clashed with his polka dotted pants. He wore a black Death Incorporated golf cap with a golf bag slung over his shoulder. He tossed them aside.

"And I see you've invited a few of my employees up to chat." One hundred very old men ambled about the office, glaring at Death. Most held improvised weapons, such as scissors, paper weights and umbrellas. One grim-faced man held a stapler and smacked it into his

palm over and over, stapling himself.

The smell of deodorant and prunes overpowered the room.

Death studied Chaos and, after glancing at the empty spot where Chaos had previously hung, nodded. "I see Chaos is back to normal," Death said.

"How many brothers and sisters were in your litter? Ha!"

"Yes, and so is Mom," Zuku said. Unfortunately, he thought.

"And I'm sure you remember me," Zak said. Death did a double take as he noticed the sea turtle off to the side for the first time.

"Zak? Still around after all these years? Hmm... I guess turning you into a turtle forever made you rather ageless, didn't it? But with what, a fraction of your past powers, which I took from you?" He turned back to Zuku, ignoring the turtle's icy stare.

"You know what happens now, don't you?" Zuku asked.

Death sighed. "I know. We fight to the death, except you can't kill me and I can't kill you. So it's a draw. Then I go back to ruling the world and you become a parlor magician at kid's parties. But you're forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"You'll find out!"

And so their second battle began.

"Penguins like to sit on your face!" Mom cried. "Wolves howl at your butt! Ha! Get 'em, Sonny!"

Zuku raised Chaos. Each time he advanced with the enchanted sword, Death threw him aside with a wave of his hand. Zuku wasn't caught off guard this time by giant jaws and skeletal feet.

"Men, join me in our battle!" Zuku cried.

Horon frowned. "We can't. He still has our souls."

Death's grin threatened to cut his face in two. "After we finish our business here, I've got a new man-sized microwave you will all get to know well!" He opened his mouth and hysterical laughter came out. The gust of wind knocked several works of art off the walls.

Then, in mid-laughter, Death leaped toward Zuku, arms raised. With a swing of the gleaming Chaos, Zuku lopped off Death's left arm and sleeve as his mom chattered in glee.

"That's it, Sonny, disarm him! Ha! Your stink makes skunks run! Ha!"

Blood spurted out for a few seconds, then stopped. Death laughed and Zuku watched in amazement as a new arm sprouted and rapidly grew back. The lopped off arm shriveled up.

"My powers have improved since we last met," Death said. "You can't hurt me. Give up now."

Zuku charged again, catching Death off guard. This time he lopped off Death's head. The disembodied head laughed as it began to shrivel up. Within seconds, a new head had grown back in its proper place. The shriveled head lay still on the floor.

"And now the coup de grâce!" Death said. "Have you forgotten how I defeated you before?" Death raised his arms and looked at the 100 or so employees in the office. "You four—attack the turtle. The rest of you—*attack Zuku!*"

"Don't make us do this!" cried Horon. But even as he said this he ambled after Zuku, cane in hand. The grim-faced man threw the stapler at Zuku, smacking him in the face.

"You have no choice," Death said. "I have your souls, right here!" His eyes blazing red, he held up his right middle finger.

WHISH!

Death stared in astonishment at where his middle finger had been before Zuku lopped it off with a stroke from mighty Chaos.

"Give the finger, lose your dinger! Ha!" Mom exclaimed. Zuku scooped the shriveling finger off the ground and held it in his hand.

But Death just grinned. "It'll just grow back!" It was doing so even as he spoke.

"True. But now I hold their souls," Zuku said, holding up the tiny shriveled finger. "Everyone! *Attack Death!*"

One hundred very old men ambled toward an astonished Death. So did one very angry sea turtle.

Death easily defended himself against them while keeping up his guard against Zuku. The five-thousand-year-old men surprised Zuku by how physical and vicious they could be, even as Death ripped them apart with heat, fire, skeletal feet and the terrible Jaws of Death. Zuku did his best to defend his men, as did Zak with what powers he had left.

Then Horon organized ten of the old men to corral Death against his desk. Death didn't see ten others and a gesticulating sea turtle crawl behind the desk and tip it over as he was guarding against ten others that were using the *Ex Nihilo* sculpture as a battering ram.

As the huge desk fell on him, Death used all his powers to push it aside while defending against the *Ex Nihilo* as well. While he was distracted, Zuku attacked.

He used no jaws or skeletal feet, and needed no heat, cold or

lightning. With two sweeps of Chaos, he lopped off Death's arms. Before they could grow back, he had Death tied up in green lines of force.

The grim-faced man moved in, wielding his stapler on Death as the helpless wizard yelped in pain. Zak slapped Death in the face several times with his powerful flippers.

The office broke up in hoarse, whispery cheers.

"Bravo, son!" exclaimed the sea turtle.

"*You still better listen to your dear ol' Mom more!*" said the tiny mouth on Chaos, "*or I'll tell bed-wetting stories!*"

Zuku held up the shriveled finger. "Do you want your souls back? You will no longer be immortal."

There was an overwhelming chorus of "Yes!"

There was no point in asking all 18,000. Zuku tossed the shriveled finger from Death into the air, and with a swish from Chaos, cut it in two.

A few small wisps of smoke came out of each half of the finger. Then, in rapid fire, the wisps shot out like popcorn, turning the finger halves into miniature rockets. They flew about the office like burst balloons as eighteen thousand souls headed back to their original owners. Most went through the floor to the lower levels where most of the employees were. One hundred souls went to the one hundred men in the room.

The men luxuriated in their newly regained souls. "That empty feeling inside—it's filled!" Horon exclaimed.

"I need a bottle," Zuku said, all business. Horon picked up something from Death's desk and handed it to Zuku.

"No way!" Death exclaimed, fighting the lines of force.

Using the same spell Death had used five thousand years before, Zuku transformed Death into smoke and motioned it into the bottle of Wite-Out that Horon had handed him. They could barely hear Death's outraged cries from inside.

"So what are you going to do now?" Death shouted, spitting Wite-Out from his mouth. "Throw me in the ocean? I'll be back someday and will have my revenge!"

"Well, that might not happen for a long time," Zuku said. "I wonder if that giant squid is still around?"

"Um, sir?" Horon said. "Things have changed a bit. I know where you could send him where he won't come back for quite a long time. Our company recently bought, or rather blackmailed for, majority

ownership from the government of a rather important business.

"What's that?"

"Have you heard of the Space Shuttle?" ●



ADRIFT WITH A BONE DIE

Michael Anthony

Four of them were left—three men and a woman—out of the original eleven. Five died when the jump went bad, ripping the hull apart and exploding their bodies into deep space. They were the lucky ones, Roland sometimes thought. Then there was the child who died in the shuttle several hours later, despite his efforts to keep her alive. As merely the first mate of the now defunct Sayonara XT-417, a third class cargo junket out of Sol, his medical training was limited. And then there was the captain. Lost him last week. If you wanted to use that euphemism.

The shuttle was a cylindrical thing, rounded at each end, with a black metallic exterior. Roland thought it was ironic the Sayonara's lifeboat resembled a casket; and it was not much bigger. Kawalski, the burly rancher who was no longer so burly, stood six foot four and had to duck when pacing around. The shuttle spanned 40 steps from stern to bow, 20 from starboard to port, with a latrine that reminded Roland of a rat cage. The bio-recycler, a chest-high metal cube, sat in back, providing them with oxygen, water and power. Everything they needed to live. Except food.

Roland sat chained in his corner in the back of the shuttle, watching Joshua prepare the meal. Joshua was a lanky man whose cheeks had sunken into pock-marked craters, and his eyes bulged like golf balls in the receding flesh of their sockets. He clutched a femur, formerly attached to the captain, and it snapped like a tree branch as he cracked it open. Holding his knife like a chisel, he twisted his wrist and the bone split apart, exposing the chalky substance inside.

Roland had watched the orchestrated maneuvers, his surgeon-like precision with the knife. He knew Joshua was an experienced chef, but he wouldn't have guessed this was the first time he had butchered a person.

"A human corpse is similar in many ways to a pig or Gacka carcass," Joshua had said before he dismembered the captain's body

a week before.

Joshua scooped out the pasty substance inside the long bones, dropping each spoonful into a pot of boiling water at the shuttle's makeshift stove. He added a pinch of salt, pepper, a dash of some other spice he had brought aboard, and the water bubbled and gurgled, steam snaking into the air. The meaty aroma permeated the cabin.

Kawalski sat at the shuttle's small table and twitched his nose, sniffing the air. "You have a talent, Chef," he said.

"The meat is gone," Joshua said to Roland, "but marrow soup will provide sustenance." He lifted the ladle, some of the steaming liquid dripping back into the pot. "You sure you won't try some?"

Roland grimaced. His stomach back-flipped and he cursed himself for letting his mouth salivate. He wasn't sure how much longer he could refuse food before his animal instincts took over. He wasn't as religious as Nadia, but he believed his soul would be unsalvageable if he partook in human flesh.

Nadia, who was a priestess in an obscure religious sect, sat in the opposite corner; a shackle hooked around her ankle with a pig iron chain that looped through the bio-recycler's latch. She nodded at him as if she could read his thought.

Joshua turned his gaze to her. "What about you? I'm sure your mindchip wouldn't prevent it." He smiled, exposing rickety teeth and bleeding gums. "Eating isn't a sin."

Nadia clutched her ivory robe, pulling it closer to her body, and shook her head.

"No comment? A month ago you would have lectured me on Hell."

"Why would I lecture you on a subject you are so intimate with?"

Joshua's smile evaporated into the air like the steam from his soup. "Suit yourself."

Nadia started coughing and tried to cover her mouth with a trembling hand. Roland crawled over, as far as his chain would allow, and put his arm around her. He felt the outline of her shoulder blade and the robe bunched up in his hand. Her angelic face, once the color of honey, now had a yellow hue like that of an old porcelain doll. She gazed up at him.

"God won't forsake us," she whispered. "We must hold on."

He forced a smile, trying to believe the words. After months adrift in that deserted space between galaxies, hope for rescue had wilted like a picked flower.

Joshua ladled out two cups, handing one to Kawalski, and took a seat next to him. Kawalski slurped down the oily liquid. His belly had retreated into a loose flab of skin that dangled over his belt, and his nose was elongated and sharp, and he twitched it often, like a cargo rat sniffing for something to steal, Roland thought. His unclipped mustache, a patch of black hairs that zigzagged in random directions, even resembled rodent whiskers.

Kawalski leered at Nadia as he drank, his gaze roaming over her shackled body.

Roland jerked forward. "Quit staring at her!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

Roland tried to stand; his legs buckled and he collapsed. The shackle around his ankle bit into his flesh like the head of an iron snake.

"That's what I thought. You don't have the strength to bark orders, Lieutenant. You should have eaten like we did." Kawalski held out his cup. "Have some soup and we'll unshackle you. Then we can take turns with the girl," he said and winked.

"Unshackle me and see what happens."

Kawalski clutched his electro-baton, and started to lurch forward.

"I voted with you and the captain to stay alive," Joshua said to Kawalski, his eyes bulging farther out, "but if you touch Nadia I'm with them."

Kawalski lowered the baton and smiled. "I was just joking. Can't anybody take a joke?"

"No one is amused. You're an uncouth jackass."

Kawalski squinted, tilting his chin upward. "I find your newfound morality hypocritical, considering the circumstances."

"We're doing what we have to, to stay alive, but we have rules and we'll at least be civil to each other."

"Is shackling those two because they wouldn't participate being 'civil'?"

Joshua lowered his eyes. "We couldn't risk a mutiny."

Roland watched them bicker. There had been many such altercations over the months, and he hoped for an advantage he could exploit.

Kawalski finally clucked his tongue and nodded. "Whatever you say, chef," he said. "And we're out of meat, be time for another roll soon."

Joshua stared into his cup, swishing the liquid around. "I'm afraid so."

The next day Roland awoke to whispering. He spied Joshua and Kawalski, hovering near the table, backs to him. Nadia lay in her corner, head resting against the bio-recycler, her eyes open and vacant.

Kawalski paced over. He dug in his pocket and fished out his bone die.

"It's time," he said, jiggling the cream-colored die in his palm. Black dots covered each side like melanoma.

Roland remembered Kawalski's claim that the die had been carved from the skull of a reptile-like creature on his homeworld and hardened in a special kiln. "It's a certified official bone die," Kawalski had said. The memory made him cringe.

"We'll keep our same numbers," Kawalski said, offering the die to Roland. "Want to roll?"

"Go hump a Gacka."

Kawalski nodded at Joshua. "You?"

"It's your turn, just make sure it bounces. I don't want you trying to cheat."

"I don't cheat, I'm naturally lucky," Kawalski said, smirking. He closed his fingers around the die, shook his fist, and then flung it across the floor. The cube bounced against the wall, spun for a moment and stopped. The fate of the next person lay exposed.

Joshua swallowed; his Adam's apple bobbed up and down with the motion. "It would make more sense to take one of them. They're almost dead anyway."

"You're the one who insisted we have rules. As you said, 'fair is fair.'"

"The girl is the worst off," Joshua croaked, his voice cracking. "Let's take her. It would be a mercy killing."

Nadia made a motion across her chest, whispering a silent prayer.

Kawalski fingered his mustache, and after a moment nodded. He unhooked the electro-baton from his belt. It was a polymer tube three feet in length with a metal-covered tip. The Captain allowed him to bring it aboard to herd the Gacka, but with the animal long since eaten, the livestock chains were serving another purpose as well.

Kawalski switched it on and it crackled with energy.

Roland lunged, his chain holding him back. "Leave her alone!"

"Quiet or we'll take you both."

"I'm sorry, Nadia," Joshua said, standing. "You will be going to a better place." He staggered over and loomed above her like a carnivorous scarecrow.

Nadia scooted away, backing into her corner, shivering.

"Please," Roland said. "Don't do this—"

Kawalski darted forward and tapped the back of Joshua's head with the baton. There was an electrified pop and Joshua collapsed on Nadia, his arms and legs convulsing in a death-dance. Nadia screamed and flailed her arms and unchained leg, trying to push him off. Joshua's body went still, his eyes receding back into their sockets. Smoke rose from the back of his head in charcoal puffs.

Kawalski smiled weakly. "'Fair is fair,'" he said. "He was a weasel anyway. At least the captain accepted his fate."

"May God forgive you for this," Nadia whispered.

"God doesn't have jurisdiction out here," Kawalski said, pulling the corpse to the table.

"You're an animal," Roland said, sneering.

Kawalski smirked. "We're all animals, Lieutenant. Some of us are just smarter and wind up at the top of the food chain." He prepared the soup, dropping hunks of meat into a pot of boiling water. The aroma filled the cabin and he made himself a plate.

Roland scooted near Nadia. "You okay?"

"God help me, I must be losing my mind," she whispered. "It smells good. I'm so hungry."

Roland nodded.

"You two want some?" Kawalski held up one of Joshua's boiled arms.

Nadia's face contorted and she hunched over, dry heaving.

"What's wrong? It tastes just like chicken," Kawalski said, smirking. "I told you Joshua had a yellow streak."

Roland stared at him. "How will you explain the murders when we get rescued?"

"It's not murder if everybody agreed to the terms and we rolled fairly."

"We didn't agree to the terms."

"Majority rules." Kawalski then fisted a chunk of meat into his mouth, tearing it with his teeth. His lips and chin reflected light from a layer of grease.

Roland's mouth salivated as he watched, and he swallowed a mouthful of spit. He hoped they'd be rescued soon, before Kawalski would want another roll, or, God forbid, they'd want to join him at the table.

* * * * *

Roland squinted at the shuttle's chronometer. A week had passed since Joshua's death. He tried to keep track of dates and events; when they were rescued he would take pleasure in recounting it all at Kawalski's trial.

Nadia dozed in her corner. Her robe, which once fit snug on her delicate frame, now draped loose over her body. Roland noticed she was sleeping most of the time now. He jerked his bony ankle; the chain held him firm. He had almost lost enough weight to squeeze his foot through the shackle and he tried every couple of hours.

Kawalski noticed him struggling. "You're wasting your time, Lieutenant. I've been chaining stronger livestock than you for years."

"Let us go and you'll avoid murder charges."

Kawalski snorted. He shouldered a bag and strolled over to the bio-recycler. Roland glanced up, considered punching him in the groin and clenched his hand into a fist.

"Don't try it, Lieutenant. You don't have the strength to take me out, and you won't like the feel of my baton on its lowest setting."

Roland unclenched his fist and tightened his lips.

Kawalski lifted the hatch, dumping the contents of the bag inside. Flabs of boiled skin, bones, cartilage, and other inedible odds and ends from Joshua's body spilled out.

"Skinny bastard, his meat didn't last long." Kawalski shut the hatch and slapped it with his palm. "At least this thing still gives us water." He sashayed over to Nadia and nudged her leg with his foot. She jerked awake.

Kawalski pulled out his bone die, jiggling it. "Okay, kids. Time for another roll."

"Screw you," Roland said.

"I don't like this any more than you do. I'm not some monster. At least this way there is a chance some of us can survive—"

"Screw you," Roland repeated.

"If my number comes up I'll free you both. Fair is fair. I'll even let you roll."

"I'll have no part of this madness," Nadia mumbled.

"Fine." Kawalski twitched his nose and rolled the die; it bounced across the floor, stopping near Roland. Three black dots stared up at them.

Nadia lowered her eyes.

Roland kicked the die across the cabin. "Don't touch her!"

Kawalski cut his eyes at him. "Giving orders again, Lieutenant?"

"We're on a major shipping lane, due to be rescued any time," he said, softening his voice. "Just hold off for a week, that's all I ask."

"If the jump had worked we'd be on the shipping lane. Who knows where the wormhole shat us out," Kawalski said. "We could be on the other side of the universe."

"Unshackle me and I'll see if I can boost the beacon."

"Waste of time. You had plenty of opportunities to 'boost the beacon.'"

"Then take me."

Nadia touched his arm. "No." She glanced at Kawalski. "Listen to him. You won't starve if you hold off for a week. We're still alive and we haven't eaten anything since the shuttle's supply ran out, and the meat from that animal you brought aboard."

"And you're both almost dead. I don't want to get to that point."

Nadia put her hands together. "Just give us a few days. Please."

Kawalski crouched for his die, brushed it off and placed it on the table. "I'm sorry, but the deal is done. Fair is fair—"

"I've seen the way you look at me," Nadia said, trying to smile. "If you stop this madness I'll—" Her mouth contorted, as if choking back the words. "—I'll do whatever you want."

"Joshua isn't here to protect you, I could make you do anything I wanted anyway."

"You are many things, but you aren't a rapist." She forced a smile. "And isn't it better if I am willing?"

"Your mindchip would let you forsake your vows?"

"Sexual activity isn't a sin."

"Okay. But let me make a counter proposal. What you're offering in exchange for a re-roll."

"You bastard—"

"It's that or nothing. I may be horny, but I'm hungrier."

She bit her lip. "Fine."

Roland grabbed her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"If we get another roll at least we have a chance his number will come up," she whispered. "It's got to come up sometime."

"Don't do this. He can't be trusted."

Nadia peered up at Kawalski, her eyes narrowing. "And if your number comes up how do I know you'll keep your end of the bargain?"

Kawalski raised his hand, palm facing her. "I'm a trustworthy guy. 'Fair is fair,' right? I proved that with Joshua. I could have killed you."

"You'll forgive me for not taking your word for it." She pointed to

the electro-baton. "Let me hold that until after the roll."

Kawalski chuckled. "And if your number came up you'd zap me. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"I am incapable of committing murder."

He gestured to Roland. "Then you'd toss it to him and he'd do it."

"That would make me an accessory to murder. I couldn't do that either," she said. "After the roll I'll give it back if one of our numbers comes up. You have my word as a Priestess of Elatia."

Kawalski twitched his nose. "Okay. We have a deal." He placed the electro-baton on the table and strolled over. Kneeling, he unlocked the shackle and began groping at her robe.

"Not here," she said, glancing at Roland.

Kawalski's cheeks flushed. "I don't care if he watches!"

"The bathroom."

"It's too small in there—" He clenched his jaw. "Fine. Get up."

Nadia struggled to her feet. Kawalski led her by the wrist into the latrine, the door hissing shut behind them.

As soon as they were inside Roland began crawling toward the table. The electro-baton lay on the far side. He imagined sticking it up Kawalski's ass and turning it on. He scurried on hands and knees, the movement making him dizzy, and slumped to the floor. A thousand pinpoints of color blurred his vision then went dark. Shaking his head, the blood flow returned and he continued knee-staggering forward.

He reached the edge of the table and the shackle dug into the arch of his foot, the chain stretched to its limit. The baton lay a few feet away. He yanked his leg, lurching forward and thrust out his arm. Out of reach. He jerked his leg harder and the shackle dug into the bony part of his ankle, cutting into the skin. He exhaled, stretched his arm, and wiggled his fingers. Still too far. He gulped down air and collapsed.

Kawalski's voice vibrated through the wall and Nadia cried out. God only knew what nasty things he was doing to her. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself back up. The bone die sat near the baton, but closer. He grabbed at it. Just out of reach. He jerked his chained leg and felt the edge of the shackle dig into his flesh; blood oozed from the wound but the effort gained him an inch. He reached out and flicked the side of the die with his middle finger. It spun on its corner, toward him, and he snatched it.

He leaned back, cupping the die in his palm, half-expecting it to jump back out. It was an indifferent tool for their macabre lottery, like straws or names in a hat, but he suddenly felt hatred for it. He clenched

his fist around it, squeezing, his bony knuckles bleeding white. It wouldn't break. The die was hardened, like steel, and it made an indentation in his palm. He unclenched his fist and shook it. It jiggled, wavering on its side, and then regained balance. The weight placement felt strange, as if it were top-heavy.

He tilted his hand, letting the die fall to the floor. It landed with Nadia's number face up. He picked it up, rolled. It bounced, stopped, and as he suspected, Nadia's number came up. He rolled it three more times, and each time Nadia's fate was sealed.

"That fucking bastard," he muttered. He held the cube at eye level, examining it. Part of the inside was hollow, where the animal's brain had been. The skull had been carved into a hexagon shape, each corner a smooth cut, except one on Nadia's side. It was barely noticeable, but Roland spied a discoloration and a slight protrusion. He picked at it, and after a little scratching a dab of weighted material peeled off.

Kawalski had passed the die around when they were first considering the lottery. The captain and Joshua had examined it, tested it, satisfied it was legitimate. He figured Kawalski was adding the material just before each roll.

Kawalski's voice bellowed through the wall and Roland jerked his head up. They were done. His heart thudded and he thumbed the substance back on; his hand shook and it fell off.

Shuffling in the bathroom. They were coming out.

He patted the substance on one of the corners, pushing, and then placed the die back on the table. As he crawled back to his corner the door hissed open and Nadia staggered out.

Roland blinked at her. "You okay?"

She nodded. Her robe was disheveled and her eyes were pink and puffy. Kawalski followed after her, panting, sweat on his face and neck.

"You've earned your re-roll," he said, waddling over to the table and grabbing the die.

Roland crouched in the corner, watching.

Nadia sobbed. "I'm going to Hell."

Kawalski smiled at her. "Come now, that wasn't so bad—"

"We're all going to Hell!" she shrieked, then placed her hands over her face.

"Give her the baton, like you promised," Roland said.

"Yes, of course." Kawalski held out the baton. Nadia grasped it, letting it dangle at her side.

"Kill him now!" Roland shouted.

"I wish I could."

Kawalski smirked, jiggling the die in his hand. "Ready?"

Nadia tried to nod, but her head just moved sideways down.

With a flourish Kawalski flung the die across the floor. It bounced against the wall, spinning back to him, and came to rest at his feet. He blinked at it like lead weights were attached to his eyelids. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Something's wrong," he said, picking it up. He rolled again. Same result. He snatched it, holding it to his eye and turning it in his fingers the way a jeweler examines a diamond.

"Very clever." He pointed to Roland. "He cheated! The deal is off!"

"You've been cheating all along!" Roland said.

Nadia turned on the electro-baton. It hummed, vibrating in her hand.

"Wait! He cheated! Your mindchip won't let you commit murder. Put that down!"

Nadia smiled, her lips stretching over saliva-coated teeth. "It's not murder if you agreed to the terms, remember?" She aimed the baton at him. "'Fair is fair,'" she mimicked.

"You're supposed to be a woman of God! Listen, put that down and I'll—"

She darted forward, like a bull charging a matador, and struck him in the chest. The voltage sent him flying against the wall; his body slumped to the floor, the front of his shirt smoking. Nadia staggered over and held the baton to his neck. His body jerked and convulsed and his hair started to smoke.

"He's dead, you can stop," Roland said.

Nadia pursed her lips, holding the baton in place. The smell of burnt flesh filled the cabin and Roland saw the corners of her mouth curling into a smile.

After several minutes Kawalski's face and neck were charred beyond recognition.

"Nadia! Stop, he's dead!"

Nadia lowered the baton and swiveled her head. Her appearance seemed to have changed, like she was wearing a mask of her old face.

"Get the shackle key, it's in his pocket."

She pulled it out and hobbled over, unlocking him. The shackle fell to the floor with a clank.

Roland rubbed his bleeding ankle. "Thank you."

She nodded, a glint in her eyes he recognized from the others—hunger that didn't care how it was satiated.

"Let's eat," she whispered.

Roland blinked at her. "What about your mindchip?"

"Joshua was right," she said, smirking. "Eating isn't a sin."

"But—"

"Are you going to help me or not? If not I'll eat myself and you'll starve."

He sighed. "I'm too hungry to object anymore."

They each grabbed an arm and dragged the corpse to the table. Nadia used Joshua's knife and carved through Kawalski like an experienced butcher.

Roland turned his head, grimacing. "I can't watch."

"What's a matter? It's only Kawalski," she said. She carved out chunks of meat, placing the flesh-steaks into the pot. After a half hour the meat boiled and they sat down to eat.

Nadia buried her head in her plate like a pig at a trough, her head bobbing up and down. Her cheeks bulged with flesh and her lips and chin were greasy.

"I hope God will forgive us for this," Roland said, his eyes lowered.

"You're a fool," she mumbled. "God's on vacation."

They finished in silence.

Several months passed, or maybe it was a few weeks; the shuttle's chronometer went haywire and Roland lost track of time. His stomach made glub-glub sounds like a fish out of water and he tried to massage the noises away. With Kawalski's meat gone, their hunger had returned with all the vengeance of the Bible. He glanced at Nadia and saw her sleeping face, no longer angelic, but contorted and old. She rarely spoke now, unless it was to curse God. Sometimes when she thought he was asleep he heard her mumbling to herself.

He leaned his head against the bio-recycler and shut his eyes. Not much left to do but sleep, and pray for a ship.

He had the rescue ship dream again. In it, like always, he peered out the port window and saw a bean-sized dot in the distance, increasing in size as it approached. A ship. He felt his pulse beating in his temple, his hands shaking. They were saved. Finally.

He pushed his nose against the window, fogging it up with his breath. The bean grew in size as it approached, faster, and he felt his stomach plummet as he recognized what it was: Kawalski in a clown

suit, doing floating cartwheels. He was grinning and clutching bone dice in oversized clown-fists. His nose twitched as he swivelled his head to stare into the window. "You are what you eat," he cackled, "from your head to your feet!"

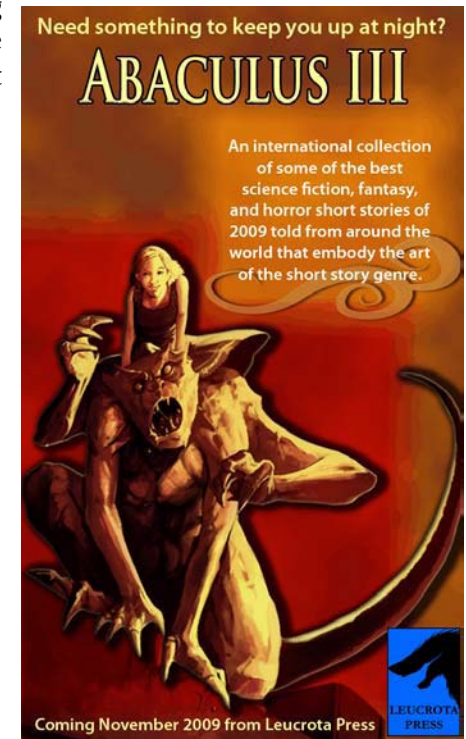
Roland twitched awake. His arms and legs tingled, still in the state between nightmare and reality. He thought he heard a giggle, but wasn't sure if it had been in the dream. It was dark in the shuttle, the overhead lights had burned out days, or weeks before, he couldn't remember. He squinted, his eyes focusing on a silhouette in front of him. It was Nadia, crouched against the wall with Kawalski's bone die jiggling in her hand. She stared back at him. Her lips, two purple worms, slithered into a smile.

"What is it?" he asked.

She twitched her nose.

She's lost it, he thought. He curled back in his corner. He was tired again, wanted to sleep, but didn't like the way Nadia was watching at him.

The hours crawled by and he struggled to stay awake. After a while he felt his eyelids creeping shut, his head lolling against his shoulder. The last thing he heard, drifting into unconsciousness, was the clatter of the bone die as it bounced across the floor. ●



IN THE SHADOW OF ULURU

Paula R. Stiles

Consider, my esteemed friends and colleagues, the dodo. I have, many times. What a bird of great estimation: fat, ungainly, gentle, a walking feast for mankind. Truly, the poor dodo was not quite of this world.

I know of a few other things not quite of this world. I do not speak solely of dodos or wombats or crinoline or even the chances of Susan B. Anthony gaining us women the vote. No, I speak of something more unworldly, more sinister, than that.

Once, when I was far younger and more nimble than I am now, I received the opportunity to travel to the South Pacific, specifically the Antipodes. I took passage on a steamer with my new husband, Albert. He had been posted as a functionary to the government of South Australia, not far from Stuart, now known as Alice Springs. He was not a bad man, but we were an awkward match. I tended toward scholarly studies whereas his enthusiasms were of the grosser kind—cigars and portraits of half-nude young ladies in Ancient Greek or Roman settings. He had little interest in my scientific pursuits, but I will happily grant that he never made any attempt to interfere with them.

I was therefore surprised and pleased when, shortly after our arrival in Australia, Albert sat down to breakfast with me and made a proposal.

“Mary, dear,” he said, buttering a muffin, “have you heard of Baker’s Rock?”

This roused my interest. I put down my boiled egg and looked at him with more fondness than usual. “Why, yes, I have. It is that nearby outcropping. Sandstone, I believe. Much like Ayers Rock, I understand, but smaller. The local Aborigines are fond of it. They have made drawings on it and such like.”

“Yes, I thought it might appeal to your peculiar enthusiasms. The Reverend Giles and his wife have invited us to go there for a picnic on Monday.”

This greatly pleased me, though I vaguely recalled the Reverend

Giles from a single previous acquaintance as a bore. His wife’s name utterly escaped me. Apparently, it had also utterly escaped my husband. No doubt I would be forced to engage in dull talk about housekeeping and the possibility of children with the Mrs. Reverend Giles. I reminded myself that not every woman had an uncle who was willing to take his niece’s scientific education in hand, or indeed any education that did not involve household chores or needlework. If I truly wanted to feel fortunate, I could always consider what it would be like working as a wife out at one of the sheep stations on an endless round from the stove to the table to the washtub and back again. I shuddered at the thought.

“Are you all right, dear?” Albert asked. He could be unusually perceptive on occasion.

“Of course,” I said. “A picnic on Monday sounds absolutely delightful.” Baby discussions or not.

“Ah, good.” He then proceeded to inhale his muffin.

Monday duly came. I made up a picnic basket for myself and my husband. While I was leaving our half-caste maid with instructions on doing the chores, she kept giving me odd looks. She was a good-looking girl in a dark way, plump and cinnamon-skinned in her black-and-white uniform and apron. “Where would ma’am be going so as I may know when you are coming back?”

When I told her our destination, she turned rather green, wringing her apron as if it were wet with blood and must be washed free of stains.

“Oh, ma’am,” she said. “Don’t do that, ma’am.”

I thought I knew what might be concerning her. “I assure you...” I groped for her name, having just hired her the previous week. “...Esther, that we intend no disrespect to the place. I understand that it is sacred to your people.” Even though she had been raised in a school to teach her Christian ways, I had no doubt she’d clung to at least some of the usual Aboriginal superstitions taught at her mother’s knee.

But she surprised me. “That is no sacred place to anyone, ma’am, not black nor white. It is not like Uluru at all. It is the shadow of Uluru, ma’am.”

I stared at her, puzzled. “‘Uluru’?”

She looked away. “What you whites call ‘Ayers Rock.’ But that place you go to now, that place is *bad*. You should not go.”

I confess this greatly intrigued me. I had asked about Baker’s Rock,

of course, but had not heard much one way or the other. The whites paid it little mind and I knew no other Aborigines than Esther, full-blood or half-caste. Such as I must not mix with such as they, even more so in the British colonies, it seemed. This young maid was my first contact in that regard.

"Why what do you mean, Esther?" I said amiably.

She hunched her shoulders. "I couldn't say, ma'am. I've never been there." I sensed she was lying, or at least not telling me all that she knew. "But I've heard tell... the shadows there, *they won't lie down*."

I was taken aback by this. *They won't lie down?* "I don't know what you mean, Esther."

She shook her head, looking miserable. "You haven't known me long, ma'am, so I understand why you wouldn't trust what I say. But you've been kind enough and I like the work here. Just... don't go."

For a moment, I considered her warning. It had such urgency in it and I did not doubt her sincerity. Still... "I am sorry, Esther, but I am afraid I must. It would be very awkward for me to back out now."

Her shoulders slumped, as though she had expected as much. She nodded, then put up a hand. Scurrying over to the stove, she took down a strange, small bag that I had seen her hang up the first day of her arrival. She came back and handed it to me. "If you should need this, ma'am."

I pulled the drawstring and peered into the bag, seeing mainly rocksalt with some kind of dark seasoning in it. "What is this?" I said.

"Salt...and other things. Cast it behind you for protection. And run to holy ground—if you can. There is a little church at the bottom of the hill there, built for my people by the missionaries. Or... there was." She turned away, with hesitation, as if she did not expect to see me again. I confess that, despite my scientific excitement at the prospect of seeing the Rock and my natural curiosity over local legends, her warnings gave me a small chill. I left, feeling more pensive than when I had awakened that morning.

Albert and I went off in the trap, our new gelding stepping eagerly. Baker's Rock rose above the flat land like the ridge of a dragon's back. At first, the little bay trotted proudly along, enjoying the morning air and tossing his head in joy at escaping the dreariness of the same paddock every day. He had not had an outing since we had bought him.

But as we drew closer, he slowed, the movement of his head growing uncertain as he jangled his reins and frothed at his bit.

"Here now," Albert said, giving the young horse a sharp snap with the whip, and the bay continued on his course. But he seemed more and more reluctant. Strange.

As we went, Albert said, "The Reverend Giles may entertain you, Mary. He is quite fascinated by the mysterious demise of the dodo."

"There is scarcely any mystery about it," I said. "The centuries-long predations of Man, as well as the introduction of animal predators such as the rat, can entirely be blamed for the poor dodo's disappearance. There is no mystery about it, only a tragic story of a creature that could not compete in this world once its island retreat had been breached." Ah, how my scientific pride went before a great fall.

My husband laughed. "Then you will have much to talk about with our new friends, I am sure."

I gave my husband a suspicious side-long glance. Why was he so set on pairing me off with the good Reverend Giles? I tried to remember the nameless Mrs. Reverend Giles, but come to think of it, we had never met. Was she beautiful? Had my husband already grown bored with his eccentric, intellectual wife? Did he long for a woman more like his buxom Greek parlor beauties? I had heard of wives making "accommodations" for their husbands, either with prostitutes or other such low women. It was painful, but one could live with it. It was not as though I were in love with him, after all. However, I would not want to be caught up in any kind of scandal with another man's wife, especially in a provincial outpost like this one where smaller minds might prevail and the gossip last for years. My sister had been involved in a similar scandal back home in Philadelphia which had fatally wounded the great esteem she had previously held for her spouse.

But I said nothing. These were suspicions, only. Even then, I had no legal recourse were I to resent my husband's attentions wandering elsewhere. I felt for the bag that Esther had given me. Perhaps she knew something about love charms, as well. Assuming, of course, that my husband was not already finding pleasure with her. He might prefer his own scientific experiments in exoticism. Men did.

I shook myself. This was foolish. It was as if some irrational shadow had fallen on me from Baker's Rock looming up ahead, fueled by Esther's fears. I was going on nothing but my husband's rather clumsy attempts to set up a social outing between two couples. Were I to become so unhappy every time he made a social *faux pas*, I would end up a very nervous wife.

Albert was still chattering away like a magpie, oblivious to any

distress that he might have caused. He was ever thus before social occasions. Perhaps he enjoyed them, or perhaps they made him nervous and he chattered to cover it up. I had never considered that.

To reassure him, I laid a hand on his arm. "I am quite sure that the Reverend Giles and I will come to an accord on the dodo."

I need not have worried overmuch, as it turned out, for the Reverend Giles' wife was a perfect match for him—they were a plump, middle-aged couple, ruddy of hue and straightforward of outlook on the world. Mrs. Giles was blonde, hearty and well past her prime. Reverend Giles fancied himself a bit of a naturalist. We soon struck up a desultory conversation on the aforementioned dodo in the process of unloading the trap of provisions while my husband helped Mrs. Giles lay out a rug on the grass near Baker's Rock under the shade of a tree. The Rock loomed over us like a sentinel over the landscape. Its bulbous boulders seemed to run together. Insects sang in the growing heat.

"My husband tells me that you have a theory about the dodo," I said.

The Reverend brightened. "Oh, yes. Have you heard about the South Seas notion of the veil between worlds?"

I shook my head. "No. We have only just arrived in this part of the world. There was little available on the place aside from the utterly fantastic."

He smiled as he hoisted our picnic basket clear of the trap. "Some of it may not seem so fantastic once you have lived here for some time. The natives of Java and the surrounding islands have a notion that this world is but a shadow of a far greater and brighter one. If you travel up there, you may see some of their shadow plays, where they show silhouettes on a white screen. Though you and your dear Albert should take care. It is a wild place, full of pirates."

I frowned in thought as we walked toward the tree where my husband and the Mrs. Reverend Giles had finished their task. "It sounds like the story from Plato, that our 'reality' is only a reflection on a wall, of light coming from the mouth of a cave."

He looked impressed that a woman would know Plato. "Very good, madame. Yes, something like that."

"And the connection to the dodo would be...?" I said, intrigued in spite of myself.

He leaned toward me. "Have you heard of Easter Island? No? Massive stone heads they have there, yet the people who made them

have long since disappeared. Where could they have gone when the Pacific Ocean is so very wide? Many things have disappeared in the South Seas. What if the natives here have, in their confused and primitive way, hit on a certain truth? What if there is a veil between us and other worlds and it is weaker in remote regions than where civilization reigns? The dodo's habitat of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, for example, or Easter Island? What if... things... disappear through that veil to the other worlds only in areas where they will not be quickly missed?"

I gave him a very skeptical look, for if he had not seemed so serious, I would surely have believed he was making fun of me. "Like the dodo?"

He nodded vigorously. "Indeed, ma'am. Yea verily, the dodo. Exhibit A."

"Hmm." We were now sitting down with the others. "Or it could be that the Portuguese and the rats engineered the true demise of the poor bird."

He seemed undampened by my skepticism. No doubt he encountered much like it on the subject. "Or a mundane reason like that, yes. But what if the reason were not so mundane?"

"I suppose..." I did not want to contradict him in front of his wife. Men often find that quite embarrassing.

My husband quickly rescued me, bless him. "Let us all have some wine before it gets too hot," he said, pulling a corkscrew out of our basket. We all quickly fell to with the lunch and the Reverend Giles' theory on the demise of the dodo was soon forgotten.

After lunch, I began to eye the great collection of stone beside us. Baker's Rock must have risen a hundred feet and seemed to stretch a good mile. Not Ayers Rock, but not small by any stretch of the dullest imagination.

"Have you been up it yet?" I asked the Reverend's wife. Her name was Gertrude.

She shook her head. "No, but I've been meaning to have a go at it." She turned to her husband. "Henry, would you like to try now?"

The Reverend looked sated on meat pie and lemon pastry, as did my husband. But they were both too chivalrous to say their wives nay. So up we got and started walking along the path to the Rock. It was grassier than I had anticipated. I would have thought such a wonder would attract many visitors.

"Do many people come up here?" I asked Gertrude.

She shook her head. "Not that I know of. Most people in the area would rather tend to their gardens. They don't seem very inclined to go outside or walking in the country hereabouts, especially at night. Henry and I took note of it when we first moved from Sydney a year ago. No one seems to know why they won't do it, only that it's best not to."

"Odd," I said, but my attention was soon distracted by a small chapel that we were passing. This must have been the missionary church that Esther had mentioned. Strange that it would be left derelict, particularly since we soon passed a churchyard with a goodly collection of some twenty graves. Looking around, I saw no farmhouse or other buildings, and not much fencing aside from the one running along the path on the other side almost as an afterthought. It seemed very strange, but then Australia was very strange all over. I was still getting used to the place. Still, I was glad that I had brought Esther's little bag, hung around my neck, superstitious as that may sound for a scientist.

As we walked up, my husband commenced to teach me how to hold and shoot a pistol that the Reverend Giles had lent us. I was curious about the whole concept of firearms, but had not previously gained the opportunity to use a gun. I noticed that the shadows seemed very clear. Though the morning was still reasonably young and therefore not burning hot like the afternoons, the shadows moved oddly among the crannies and crevices, as if alive and full of thought, leaping about from rounded boulder to rounded boulder like heat shimmers or mirages. And yet, when we drew closer, I could not see any aside from the usual ones one might see in the rock itself. They made each crevice seem like a hole into the earth, leading down to Hades itself.

"This is a very peculiar spot," I said, almost to myself.

"I think it's charming," Albert said, and the Reverend agreed. Gertrude only smiled and waved her fan. But their heartiness seemed forced. It fell on a stony silence as we moved deeper into the rocky outcroppings. The grass further up looked yellow, though the rains had started weeks earlier. The vegetation down the hill was lush and already growing above our heads.

A flicker of shadowy movement off to my left distracted me. I paused. "Did anyone see that?" I said, turning aside. I could have sworn that the shadow had looked man-shaped, and yet none of us had been nearby.

"See what?" Albert said. Before I could answer, the Reverend, who had wandered several paces ahead with Gertrude, halloed back to us.

"Look here!" he cried. As we obeyed, I saw him lift a human skull from the ground.

"And here is an entire skeleton!" his wife exclaimed, stooping beside him to poke at something in the yellowing grass.

As I stepped toward them, that flicker distracted me again. I looked that way at the same time that my husband also turned his head.

It was a shadow, just a queer-looking little shadow, human-shaped like a child's. Except that neither my husband nor I was casting it and no child was within ten miles of that rock.

It moved.

What happened next occurred nearly too quickly for thought. I clutched Esther's bag to my breast, suddenly apprehensive. At the same moment, my husband stepped between me and the darkness in front of us, as if in manly instinct to shield me from this new mystery. How I almost regret that he did that while I am at the same time the utmost relieved that it leaped off the rock and fell upon him instead. Had he not placed himself in that position, I might well not be here telling you this tale now. For you see, it ate his face.

It did so, not slowly like acid or an animal slashing and tearing, but all at once in a terrible swipe like the blow of a sickle, taking the flesh right off the bone. He did not even have time to scream. While he toppled forward, it swiped two, three, four times more, and ate him all up, flesh to bone.

My nerve might yet have held a fatal instant more had I not then heard from further up the path a terrible scream. A quick glance told me all—the Reverend Giles was down, nowhere to be seen. Poor Gertrude was stumbling about, covered with little black shadows like a pack of wolves upon a horse. I broke and ran, for the creature that was eating my husband had just finished up and turned toward me.

I was a fast runner when I was a young woman, even in skirts. I simply pulled them high, pistol still clutched in one hand, and ran for my very life. Down that yellowed path I sprinted until I came to the very bottom where the rocks tumbled out into the grass. Only then did I turn at bay, panting and clutching at Esther's little bag.

I could not determine at first what I saw. The creatures that moved down upon me from the twisted rocks seemed at first only tricks of the light. Then they darkened to an inky blackness that seemed to wilt sandstone as they passed across it. When the closest shape neared me, I realized that it was man-shaped-and-sized, much larger than the first one we had seen, but crouching like a beast, scampering along on all

fours. Though it flowed along the rock like any other shadow, yet it had a sort of substance, or anti-substance, as if it were a hole in the air, offensive to the eye.

I raised the good Reverend Giles' pistol then hesitated. What stayed my hand was the possible inefficacy of the action. Could I truly harm such a creature or merely annoy it? And if I annoyed it, would it attack me the way it had done my husband and the others? Then there was Esther's small bag. But I did not want to waste its contents. This creature and its ilk had already taken my husband and two companions. If I wished to survive, I would need all of my wits and resources about me.

The thing crept down toward me to within only a few feet. I could not possibly miss at such a distance. Then it... turned its face up at me and I remembered Esther's words back at the house: *The shadows there, they won't lie down*. Surely, raising a face to me should have been impossible. Yet that is just what it did. I recognized in the blackness some familiar impression. I could have sworn, indeed, that I was staring into the face of my husband. Not my husband in fact, no, nor in substance. But something obscene and otherworldly that had murdered him and put on his face as a savage might scalp a man and place the hair and skin on his head in a parody of a wig. Yet this was no savage. At that moment, I would surely have found the blackest African my friend and close comrade. I do not care what the Social Darwinists say—there are things out there in the dark that make all Men our brothers. *Those* things are our true enemies. The poor Reverend had been right about the dodo, far more than he had lived to realize. Something had pierced the veil, all right, and found our island paradise.

Impossible to say what the expression could be in that darkness, though two glowing red sparks did burn where eyes might be. Yet as it paused to observe me, I sensed a boundless malice, a desire to hurt, not out of anger or hate, but simply for fun.

Around me, the insects, who had been singing lustily away during our picnic, fell silent as if they had all been crushed in the grass. The muted heat around me shimmered. Even the wind seemed to fail.

I took a step back, unsure if this was more rash or prudent. "Get back," I told the thing that had taken the shape of my husband, "or I will shoot." My hand trembled, but I meant my business.

The thing hissed at me. I sensed intelligence behind the malice. That seemed more frightening than any human savagery. It rocked on

all fours on its perch as if about to spring.

I fired.

The impact struck the stone dead in the center of the thing's body and ricocheted off at an angle. I flung up an arm to protect my face as shards of rock flew at me. When I opened my eyes again, the thing had vanished.

A keening near the top of the Rock drew my attention upward. There, more shadows poured out of the crannies and crevices, flowing down toward me like a malignant wave.

How I have hated those men who call women weak, fearful creatures. But I will not lie now. The moment I saw those things coming toward me, my courage left me utterly. I knew that should they reach me, should they touch me, I would not live above an instant longer. I turned and fled back down the path. Fast though I ran, my skirts hampered me and shadows, of course, can travel far more quickly than Man. I saw them flickering out of the corners of my eyes, matching my stumbling, galumphing progress with insolent ease. Yet, they did not touch me. I thought at first that they might be fearful of Esther's bag, but then I heard the high scream of the bay. The horse. They had gone after the horse.

They chattered and screeched so far up the scale as they drowned out the poor thing's death cry that I thought they might be earthbound bats. It was an unholy and unearthly uproar. My husband would have called them demons. Despite my scientific bent, I would have believed him now. These things were evil—true evil. And I was trapped in their web.

The churchyard. If only I could make it there. Even if the holy ground of the church would not stop them, I could make a stand with Esther's little bag.

As I stumbled to the rotting gate and tore it open, I saw the shadows race across the dirt, like shadows of rain clouds, except that there was no cloud in the hard, pale blue sky. Strange, for it had rained on the day before.

I left the gate open to race for the churchyard, lifting my skirts again as my feet flew over the hard-packed earth. Approaching the church, I saw how derelict the place stood, the stones falling out of their mortar, the roof showing rotten holes from when the infrequent rains must have run off. Whoever had lived here once had already discovered the power of the nearby Rock. I wished I had time for a brief prayer for their souls.

Esther had said to make for holy ground. I clutched the pistol in one hand and her little bag in the other. Whatever was inside it, that would work best on holy ground, the two in combination. I was no sorceress, but I did fancy myself a scientist. Surely, the two things together would have some increase over the sum of their values. Otherwise, she would not have insisted on it in her advice.

I ran to the nearest door, which was wood. It was locked. Of course it was locked. Even abandoned as the church was, the owners must have thought to return at some point. I wasted no time standing back, cocking the pistol and firing it at the lock. This unlocked the door. Wishing my boots were sturdy men's work, I kicked the door open and pushed inside.

There were cobwebs everywhere and the light seemed unnaturally dim. Hurrying to the altar, I then swung around.

Shadows flowed into the church through the door I had just entered, the holes in the eaves, the glassless windows—slowly, hesitantly, as if some lingering sanctity gave them pause—but they still came. I thought they hissed in pain as they traveled lightly over strange petroglyphs, blackened into the stone. The now-lost parishioners had not trusted solely in the power of the Lord, relying on older magic, as well. Everywhere there had been hard light from the hot day, outer darkness flowed in like the waters of the River Styx. But the shadows did not bring with them forgetfulness, only terrible death.

I did not scream, even when the darkness formulated into black shapes that scampered across the walls and the ceiling and over the stone floor, making a noise like lizards scrabbling across sand. I did not scream when the nearer shapes resolved themselves into figures of terrible familiarity, albeit with glowing red eyes, all of them observing me with frightening candor. Shapes with neither suggestion of clothing nor suggestion of any need for such, features of neither man nor woman. Yet, I thought I could discern the forms of the Reverend Giles and his wife—and, of course, my husband, poor, brave Albert. I wondered if their suffering had ended when the shadows had taken them over, whether God's mercy extended so far. It seemed terribly important at that moment.

I aimed the pistol at them, cocking the hammer as my husband had showed me. I heard a chittering like beads rolling across the stone floor—laughter, no doubt. As far as they were concerned, I had only postponed my dismemberment at their hands, not averted it.

"Get back!" I said again. I was distantly pleased to hear firmness

and resolve in my voice that I did not even remotely feel.

The chittering increased, louder and louder—until I pulled out Esther's bag. Just as I yanked open the drawstrings, the Albert creature let out a strange cry (of rage, I thought then) and flew right at me. I flung the entire contents of the bag in its face.

Before me, the church seemed to warp and snap, as if a crevice had appeared in the very world. The creatures warped and distorted with it, and were dragged, shrieking, into its depths. Then, the hole snapped to and disappeared, taking the shadows with it.


I had a great deal to explain afterward, as you can well imagine, though I made my story as vague as possible. The searchers only found bits of my husband and the Reverend Giles, while poor Gertrude had been reduced to a bloody skeleton. Obviously, a weak woman like me could not have done all of that on her own. So, no one ever suspected me of anything untoward. I was able to maintain my innocence with a babbled story of wolflike creatures attacking us on our picnic, dingos perhaps, and an ill-timed fainting spell on my part. I am not stupid. I knew that to admit anything approaching the truth would have me locked up in a genteel asylum somewhere. I had no intention of allowing that. So I kept my mouth shut. When I returned to our house, I found Esther packed and gone. I held no animosity toward her. I would have done the same thing.

I never did stop looking behind me, or keeping a watch for shadows, particularly those out of the corner of my eye. How I wished that I could have done more for the others—poor Albert, especially, who had deserved a far better death. But I have never seen those creatures since and I hope I never will. Let them not venture here again in my lifetime. I do not think, once they wish to come in force, that mankind will be able to stand in their way, no, not even with a thousand of Esther's little bags. Every night, I pray for Albert, the Reverend and Gertrude, and I pray that I will not end up like them.

I cannot help but think that while we have been squabbling amongst ourselves over trifles, fat and too assured of our absolute superiority over Nature, others have entered our realm who are as far above us as a man with a rifle is above a fat, flightless, amiable fowl. I would like to believe that we will prevail. Yet, I cannot find much hope.

Consider the dodo, my friends, that poor, lost bird whose fate is our future. Yes, consider him well. ●

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OF OLIVE LEMON**
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**THE SOUR AFTERTASTE
OF OLIVE LEMON**
CATHERINE J GARDNER

LUNCHBOX

Alex Sivier

For the first year of my incarceration here I was convinced that their intention was to watch us suffer, to see us writhing in pain. I thought we were taken to be entertainment for twisted minds, that our screams and pitiful begging was for nothing more than their amusement. But now I am beginning to understand them better.

Very little is known about our captors, whatever they are. They generally have little contact with us. Occasionally someone is taken at random, grabbed by long muscular tentacles, slick with dripping ooze and smelling like burnt hair. They often come back with bloody wounds or broken bones, if they come back at all. I have been lucky, I have yet to be taken, but I know its only a matter of time.

I have been here about three years according to Pamela. She keeps her insanity at bay by recording information about all the newcomers. Some have tried to escape of course, but they all end up back in here, sometimes screaming with their feet ripped off. And I don't mean cut off. No sir, I mean literally ripped. This place stinks of shit and piss and death.

The road to my understanding began when the little baby came. They opened the roof and threw it down among us, from the top of our cell. We all came in the same way, plucked up from our lives and unceremoniously dropped into this cell. It was the same for the baby, dropped in from the top, but what chance did the little buggie have. It landed on its head and died instantly. Of all the torture I have suffered, and the horrors I have witnessed here, the image of the baby landing on the cold hard floor, and the sickeningly quiet thud it made, like dropping an apple, is what haunts me most. But it was the first step to understanding them.

It was the way they dropped the baby in, no different to the rest of us. Somebody had covered the poor thing with a rag that had once been a jacket. When they came back hours later to take the tiny corpse, they first prodded and played with it, dropping it several times from a

small height and pushing it across the floor, this way and that, smearing its crushed skull against the bloodied floor. Some people whimpered and cried, some screamed at them with clenched fists and some threw up. I just sat and watched, feeling very little, with the seed of understanding growing in my mind.

I remembered back to when I was a boy, helping my father pull up an old tree stump. I was standing by the side, watching him hack at the ground when I saw something small and pink writhing in the soil. I screamed at my father to stop. It was a baby mouse; he had unearthed a nest. I picked it up and put it into my plastic Thomas-the-tank-engine lunchbox, then stowed it neatly under the seat of the tractor, out of the fierce glare of the summer sun. I was careful to leave the lid open about an inch and I made a makeshift nest from some dry grass. We found seven more pups and I placed each one in the box with the care and steady hand of a watchmaker. My father humoured me, carefully handing them to me when he found them and, as I found out many years later, hiding the severed bodies of the ones his spade found first.

At the end of the afternoon, when the job was done, we headed for home. I looked in on the sleeping babies quietly and carefully. They were dead. Every single one of them. My father told me they had needed a very precise environment, that I had done my best and I shouldn't blame myself. I did. I cried about it every day for weeks. That was my first lesson about death.

There are so many of us, crammed into this hellish hole, existing on lumps of festering flesh and rotten leaves they throw down to us from time to time. And boy, is it hot here. I am often reminded of the time my goldfish bowl sprung a leak and I put Mickey and Minnie into my mother's heated tropical fishtank. I never had any more fish after that.

We have tried communicating, tapping out Fibonacci sequences and primes; creating elaborate representations of pi and hydrogen and even acting out scenes to portray our intelligence. But they don't understand, or they choose not to. I imagine our screams of agony mean nothing to them, just another interesting behaviour. The same way lobsters whistle when we boil them alive.

So now I am beginning to understand. The creatures out there are huge and from what I have seen and heard they are nothing like us. No eyes to speak of and no visible mouth. Tentacles and horns and veined rubbery skin stretched over gelatinous bulk. I like to believe they have compassion. In fact I imagine it would be hard to evolve sentience without it. But it is probably far removed from compassion and love as

we know it.

Perhaps this will indeed turn out to be our punishment in hell as many believe. Or it just might be that we are victims of cruel and sadistic tormentors as I used to think. But these days I like to imagine we are just exhibits in a zoo or critters collected and placed in a lunchbox by curious, well-meaning kids. I want to believe those monsters love their children and each other. Maybe, in some way, they even love and care for us just as I loved the tiny wrinkled mice that I baked to death so many years ago.

And so I wait. I hide and survive and fear for my life. I often like to wonder how we would treat our captors, if we had found them first. ●



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THE LAST WATCHER

Lee Pletzers

Part One

Dust filled the sky turning daylight into haze and obscuring the clouds and green sky.

The old man clambered up the long flight of steps and walked directly to a stone throne built in the shape of a large sparrow. A soft, threadbare cushion gave the only comfort on the hard rock of the throne. He laid his crooked staff at the foot of the throne, brushed dust off his long robe and took his seat.

On the throne he sat at the second tallest peak in the land. Below him the ground was a sickening red-brown. Nothing grew there. The flat land rolled out before him unchanged in the ninety years he had taken breath and the tallest building rose into the sky not far off in the distance.

It was a Tower.

A prison built in the times of old.

And it held the Old Ones.

According to tales spun by his father, they'd been here as long as time had existed. All tales were of horror and fear. Their feeding frenzy, disguises and the legend of terror they built. The words terrified him all those years ago.

A soft chuckle escaped the old man as he remembered the stories, and watched the Black Tower of a prison. He wondered if anyone had really seen the Old Ones. Did they truly exist or had he wasted the last fifty years of his life?

Had it been a wise decision to climb the steps and take the throne all those years ago? He was the only one to take the challenge at the time. Everyone else cared only for their lives; they could not see a Watcher was needed. A plague, the likes none had experienced before, washed the land with the final breath of the last Watcher. Vicious in its spree, it spared none and took all who could host the seed of sickness

into their lungs, where it festered, grew and moved on; leaving a withered corpse in its wake.

The sparse regions of water polluted quickly with the sick and infected drinking free from the pond. Pus from open and bleeding sores were cleaned and tendered in the water. It took little time for food to become sparse and for animals to turn on one another.

He saw it clear in his mind as if it had happened only yesterday.

The plague ravaged the land. The vile sickness stole his wife and sons and neighbors. It was maddening watching the town die around him, while he stood fit and strong.

Corpses rotted on the ground or in houses and the stench filled the air. Everyone was too sick to move the dead and set them alight. And in truth, most did not care.

Apart from him.

Lost and confused, he prayed to the Gods of the four elements for guidance. He wandered the dust-filled streets for hours, lost in thoughts and memories. Buildings made from designed rock sandstone were empty. The market held empty and destroyed stalls. The city water well was deserted. Scorpions played on the stone rim. Dust was heavy on the streets. Small riots continued with weakened souls trying to defend what little they had. Store owners fended off small groups. Private homeowners did the same. Yet no one accosted him.

The dying and dead littered the city streets. Passing their decaying bodies he ignored the stench and was careful where he stood. Somehow he managed to hold on and walk past. His feet kicked up dust with every step.

Without realizing it, he passed the city gates and entered the wastelands.

The sun was setting as he left the city streets and made his way across the red-brown claylike ground. In the waning light he saw the steps leading to the watcher's throne. Scattered nearby, small camps and clusters of people milled about.

As sunset turned to dusk he reached them.

On the outside border of the camp he stopped and watched a large group of people gathered before the largest tent in the camp. Voices rose and fell in angered tones in words that were strange to his ears, but with concentration he understood them. The robes draped over their bodies were different to his. The cloth seemed to shine in the waning light.

A small girl noticed him.

The girl screamed.

Everyone turned to the girl, then to him. A heavy silence befell the camp.

"Be gone," a man said. "Your sickness is not welcomed here."

He searched for the speaker but could not find him. "I am not sick," he said.

"You are not welcome," a woman said. She stood up to look him in the eyes. Her hair and face resembled his wife in color and tone but her body was chubby in places his wife wasn't.

He started to walk away from them, around the outskirts of the camp toward the steps he could clearly see even though it was almost dark.

A small child pulled on his robe snagging his attention.

"Are you the new Watcher?"

He looked down at the child, considering the question. Until he met this healthy group of people, he thought he was the next Watcher, the only person left who could do the job. The rest of the camp awaited his answer. He wondered why no one here stepped forward to take on the challenge. There seemed only one answer to give them. He knelt down in front of the boy. "Do I look like a Watcher?"

The boy shook his head. "You speak funny," he said.

"All Watchers speak funny, so I guess I am."

The child beamed as a woman rushed forward and took him in her arms and carried him back to the safety of her people.

He stood and turned from them, facing the short walk to the base of the steps that rose into the darkened sky without any kind of support. Heavy stone steps that appeared to float on the air.

The first few steps were tentative. He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing or not. He knew not what awaited him above, but he did know that nothing waited for him on the ground. He was a forty-year-old man who owned nothing apart from the robe he wore and the breath he took.

So he climbed. Each step took him higher. Soon the campsite was small. He could make out the shapes of people and objects but nothing was defined. He looked out toward the city he had come from.

Hours passed before he reached the hovel that would become his new home. It was a hovel that would serve him as it had served other generations of watchers. A kind of magic he did not understand kept the hovel strong against the winds and rains. And it was this magic that kept him alive.

From this flat expanse of rock he could see the winged throne above. His legs screamed for rest, his thighs almost betrayed him as he staggered to the seat that was a gift or a curse from the gods.

Since taking the throne, he had been alone.

Only he and the tower existed on this plain. The tower had no windows and no door he had ever seen, and the bricks shone like metal when the sun broke through the constant cloud of dust. He wondered if the Old Ones were inside, and did they have a portal to see out? Could they be watching him as he watched them?

A shiver ran down his spine. He shook it off. He was being silly. It was nothing more than old age foolery.

Fifty years passed slowly and now he was an old man watching over his kingdom. He'd considered it his soon after taking this post. He was the Watcher, was he not? He watched the tower of the Old Ones. He kept his kingdom safe.

He knew that was true, but he did not know how he kept it safe. All he could do was watch the tower. He was an old man, he could not do battle with any beast or man. He could not run down the steps and shout a warning... how could he save his people? His kingdom?

In fifty years he had never thought of this. All he did was watch. Perhaps it was time to pass the throne onto another. His time had come for sure. He could do as the Watcher before him had done and fling himself off the throne to the ground below. Someone would discover him and a younger, stronger person would fill the position.

Scrutinizing the land below him, he saw only red-brown claylike earth. He did not see any grouping of white or colored specks. Far off in the distance he hoped to see smoke or nations' flags, but he saw naught.

It was as he expected.

He was alone. He was always alone. He would die alone, that he was sure of. Tumbling from his throne and twisting to the earth, he would hit but the sound would go unnoticed.

Who then would Watch?

There was only himself. The plague had ridden this planet of all who could replace him. And his end was near. The old man could feel it in his bones and taste Death in the air.

He could not go to his forefathers yet. He would sit and watch the prison. It was his destiny, whether the Old Ones were inside or not. His dying breath would be taken upon the throne.

Death must wait.

The last Watcher. Ninety years old and ready to die but refusing to give up his position. The throne was his. The job was his. He was the Watcher. There would be no other.

Slow and with practiced ease he sat down upon the worn cushion on the stone built throne, feeling his back ache and his knees sigh with relief. He stared at the black prison. The Tower.

The Black Tower, he thought bitterly. If such a place as Hell existed, then the tower was it. The prison of the Old Ones. Shiny like black metal but made of brick. Reinforced with magic. How many were inside? Just one or one hundred?

He could barely comprehend their existence and here he was trying to count them.

There are more than you can count, his father had told him many years ago.

How do they all fit inside, he had asked.

His father smiled. With a voice full of mystic musings, he replied: *It's not for us to understand*. His eyes drifted to the prison and he ruffled his son's hair.

The old man smiled and shook his head as if the memory was powerful enough to affect reality. And maybe it was at his age—

He sat bolt upright. Something scarred the tower, running from the top to the bottom. It ran a zigzag pattern down the brick and rock. The black rock no longer looked shiny. It was dull and worn down by the ages. A scream ripped forth as the crack widened and finally reached the ground.

The instant it hit, a boom, louder than the old man had ever heard, shook the ground. The steps to the throne shook with it.

What was happening?

With mounting fear, the old man realized the Black Tower was breaking open. The bricks, rocks and magic after all these centuries were finally crumbling. The Old Ones would soon be free.

Part Two

Flapping against the wind, thousands of sparrows flew high into the city sky. Above the tallest skyscrapers, in a frenzy of sudden action, they flocked together, hiding the crystal clear sky from view. The streets darkened and streetlights flickered to life. They had turned the day to night.

The flying was erratic, heading here and there with no sense of

direction. Some collided in flight, twisting unceremoniously to the road.

Dean jumped out of the way of two such birds. In his haste, he bumped into the person behind him. "Sorry," he mumbled, but got no response. The man also stared at the birds.

Several blocks fell to semi-darkness as the number of birds increased and stretched across the sky. Never before had Dean seen so many sparrows. It surprised and scared him at the same time. Yet he felt the thrill of witnessing a once in a life time event. And he wasn't in front of the TV to enjoy it either. This was real life, living color.

From North to South the birds packed the city skyline. Traffic was at a stand-still. Cars doors were open and drivers and passengers alike stood next to their vehicles gazing up at the amazing spectacle. Faces were pressed against the glass of buses trying to get a full view.

No one cried. No one screamed the end of the world. No one panicked. Everyone was calm.

Dean broke the hold the sparrows held over him. The instant he did it, he felt free. A huge weight lifted from him. Everyone else was still locked in the sparrow's magic. The sidewalk was packed; people had exited shops, cars blocked intersections, traffic lights changed and cross signals flashed. No one moved. No one spoke. No horns blared, no impatient drivers shouted abuse, dogs did not bark and children did not cry.

The city was silent.

This small part of the world was transfixed by the aerial oddity and seeing the reaction around him, Dean felt more than bemused with the display above. A tingling of fear washed over him as he pushed past the watchers and made his way to the public toilets.

Normality. Dean searched for a slice of normality. The birds were starting to jangle his nerves in this silent city. Even the flapping of the wings made no sound. He had to latch onto an ounce of what he considered reality. For now, that was his fencing class. And he had a routine he followed every Wednesday. And follow it he would. There were no birds in the sky, no emerging patterns. Just him and his routine.

It was a weak and feeble attempt but he forced himself to follow it despite the weirdness around him and the small part that drew him to watch as well.

Using his hands as a brush, he patted dust off his jeans as he reached the unisex toilet block of eight stalls in a semicircular design. Above, a 'Natural Light' roof stretched the expanse of space between

the stalls and the cleaners' office opposite. A woman sat behind a Plexiglas window with a circle of holes positioned as a speaker. She wasn't looking at Dean. Her neck was craned to better see the action outside.

Dean entered the nearest stall and wasn't shocked to see taggers had been at work. The graffiti covered every available space. Some of it looked quite good. It almost looked professional. Only the mirror was untouched.

He stared at his reflection. Hours spent lifting weights and fencing was paying off. No beer stomach overhung his waist and he was looking quite built. Arnold Schwarzenegger he was not, but he was good enough in his eyes to appear on an infomercial. Facially, he wasn't looking as good as he had ten years ago. Lines creased his eyes, his brown hair once thick and bouncy was now streaked with white. Clear brown eyes stared back at him, deep in color and haunting.

He turned on the cold water tap and cupped cool water into his hands. His eyes closed a second before it splashed on his face. Squeezed shut, he rubbed his palms against the eyes in an attempt to dry them. He hadn't thought to check the paper dispenser first.

Everything was blurry when he opened his eyes. The graffiti on the wall behind him twisted and turned into a swirl of mixed color. Letters and symbols elongated, stretched to their limits and were violently sucked into the maddening swirl.

Dean's heart skipped a beat, his body tensed and his eyes snapped shut. "Not there," he whispered. "Nothing's there. Not there. Not there. Not there." He took several deep breaths and exhaled slowly.

When he slowly reopened his eyes, the swirl had grown. The free flowing cool water turned to green and brown sludge, chugging out of the faucet, hitting the bowl in vomit-sized chunks. The stench came from the bowels of the sewer as each blob splattered the porcelain.

"It's not real," he whispered. "It's not real."

Turning from the mirror and slug-scarred bowl he stared at the swirl. His breath came in short bursts as his heart pounded against his chest. His mouth filled with saliva but he couldn't swallow it.

Something was inside the swirl.

Covered in the swirling mass of colors, the gray thing did not move with the eddy. It was stationary in the center and looked to be miles away. Too far to be seen clearly, but what he did see terrified him.

"It's not real." His whispered voice shook. "Please, God, it can't be real."

An octopus head with long feelers like an ancient untouched moustache sat atop the body of a man with what appeared to be the wings of a dragon sticking out of the back and spread wide. Muscular arms reached out and gripped swirls of color and pulled forward; pearl white talons stretched toward and dug deep into the color and pulled. Part of its body leaned forth like a three-dimensional image in a cheap magazine looming out of the iridescence. The tentacles around its mouth lashed out as if they had an independent life-force as the grip was lost and the creature slid back to the center, once again becoming a part of the two dimensional swirl.

Dean inched his way to the toilet door. His fear-numbered fingers fumbled with the turn lock. Several times his hold on the small latch slipped. Each time his fingers slipped free, panic increased. It squeezed his chest like a vice, it danced his nerves onto broken shards of glass, his bowels tingled and his vision pinpointed.

Frustration mingled with the panic, and for a brief moment he thought he was going to cry.

From the whirling colors a howl of built-up hunger and rage seeped forth. The creature was too far away for the sound to be much louder than a hushed cough. But the power behind it bled through the bay.

Dean's fingers found the latch and finally a grip that held. He turned it to the right and threw the door open and stumbled out into the unisex entrance. White shiny walls filled his vision. The woman at the small Plexiglas window didn't notice him, her gaze still pointed to the sky.

Trembling, phlegm flowed over his shaking lip. He was aware of it but wiped it away with his hand and wiped his hand on his jeans.

Walking backwards, afraid to turn his back on the stall filled with madness, he moved to the exit. A tiled wall forced him to stop. His heart raced and adrenaline sliced through his veins.

He couldn't stop his body from twitching. All energy seeped from his legs and his knees couldn't hold him any longer. Using the wall for balance he slid to the floor and hugged his knees.

Breathing rapidly, he watched the birds.

Part Three

The old man didn't know what to do.

Standing with his weight forward and gripping his staff, he stared at the unbelievable scene unfolding before him. The crack had

widened. Steam rose from the ripped concrete and wafted to the heavens.

The flat top of the tower exploded. Large chunks of rock flew skyward. Smaller pebble-sized lumps landed near the old man's feet. He shuffled sideways to avoid them.

A whistle arose from the heavens, long and high-pitched. The old man looked up and saw a large chunk of rock plummet toward him. Gritting his teeth, he released his walking stick and raised his arms to the heavens.

Words tumbled in his head. Without thinking, he spoke them: "I am the Watcher," he cried out, eyes locked on the prison. "I command you to cease your actions!"

The tumbling rock whooshed toward him, the whistle grew louder but the old man refused to budge. He was the Watcher, this was his duty. His life had led to this moment.

With a sickening crash, the rock slammed into the throne, shattered the spine and continued falling to the ground below.

"I demand you to cease. Serve your punishment as bestowed upon you."

A voice spoke up, it surrounded the old man, wrapped him in a blanket of slow drawn out syllables. "Pray tell, who punished me?"

The old man searched for a speaker but found no one. Reluctantly he looked toward the prison. Sections broke from the top and dropped hard and fast to the ground.

His world shook with every crash of rock.

"Pray tell, who punished me?"

The old man sighed. He knew not the punisher.

The voice laughed. It was short lived. "We are both prisoners," It said. "Everything around us has been constructed." For a while the voice was silent. Then: "Do you think that is the sky? Look up old man. What skies do you know of are green?"

The old man did not answer.

He turned his attention away from the crumbling tower. Slowly he bent down and picked up the walking stick. He was an old man and felt empty inside. He could not stop what was happening. He did not know or understand how the wall broke or why it did.

Were they now free? Was their sentence not forever but only a few generations?

Where was the magic?

"We are brothers," the voice whispered. "Both of us locked in a

prison. Yours was the world below that became the throne. Mine was inside this darkness.”

The old man did not respond. His chin rested on his chest as he stared at his feet. The sound of destruction whirled around him in a canopy of noise.

“Our prison term is expiring. You are dying old man and there is no one to replace you. The plague we gifted your world wiped your race from existence. You... are... extinct.”

Now he understood. Forever only existed as long as people remembered it existed. He was the last.

Forever was about to end.

“I can feel your heartbeat, old man. Your time is almost up.”

“Why do you torment me such?”

A gruff voice replied, “I would rather stretch your skin across the remains of your throne. I would rather feast on your entrails... as you watched.” The voice rose as rage bubbled free. “There are many things I would rather perform on your trembling, stinking bones for all the years your race has watched, but you will escape via death. Mankind will pay.”

“We are extinct.”

The voice laughed without humor. “There are many dimensions of which you do not understand.” The voice paused. “This is not the only world. There be another and another and another. We are in a dimension unknown to all Man’s science under the ocean. Locked away from time. Locked away in a prison.”

The old man shook his head. “This is nonsense.” He stepped away from the remains of his throne, headed toward his hovel. The voice spoke rubbish and he intended to ignore any more filth that spewed forth.

After what seemed like a long time, the old man reached the entrance to his hovel. He noted the prison had stopped its self destruction. It could go no further until he passed his last breath. Which he feared, would be soon.

If only there was something he could do.

If only there was another watcher.

Someone to continue the word “forever.”

Rain fell, soft and sparingly at first. Soft drops fell one by one in random places, across the steps and near his feet. The rain was green. The old man looked to the cloudless sky and saw it warp and twist. Bubbles spread like lightning across the green heavenly range.

Increasing in speed, green puddles were created in the uneven stair’s surface. The old man turned from the sky and entered his hovel. Even in this small private room he had an open view of the prison.

Something flicked rapidly in and out of view from the jagged rock top where the explosion had occurred. Leaning against the glassless window frame for balance more than rest, he looked closer waiting for the next flicker.

It snapped into view for only a few brief seconds before again vanishing. But those few seconds were long enough for him to see several green/gray appendages whipping back and forth in the air, almost tangling themselves in the process. For a moment he thought the creature was praising its freedom, or just stretching. Maybe it was both.

The rain fell harder, hammering the roof and stairs. From the entrance doorway, he saw the puddles overflowing and running off the edge of the platform. The entire terrace was soaked, green water ran like a stream over the sides as the rain continued to pound down harder and faster.

The old man had a sinking feeling. He hobbled from the safety of his home and stopped at the edge and looked down. It was as he feared. The Old Ones were showing their power and growing strength by drowning this world. Already the dry land below looked under water.

Without warning, the old man’s heart squeezed against his chest. The pain, sudden and immense, dropped him. His knees splashed in the ankle-deep water. Fat drops pounded his face as the rain sliced in at an angle.

The old man wiped his hand across his mouth and tasted salt and seaweed essence. Confused, he recalled what the voice had told him. Was there a hint of truth in their words? Had his entire race been a prisoner under the ocean?

Again the pain screamed at him, gripped his chest in a vice and tightened the screws. He dropped face first to the cold rock platform. His nose was barely out of the rain water and his arms drooped over the side.

He forced breath into his lungs, forced himself to remain alive. He wanted to hold the Old Ones as long as possible.

“Why suffer the pain?” the voice said seeming to read his inner thoughts. “Taste freedom and rid thy body of such agony.”

“You’ve waited long enough. You can wait a while longer.”

“You are right,” the voice said.

The old man did not speak. His time was up, he knew that. Giving up was not in his blood. Every minute he breathed someone lived longer, someone else was saved a breath of pain. Conserving his energy was the only way to accomplish that and to hold on just a bit longer.

His fingers curled up into his palm as his heart screamed out. The prying eyes of the Old Ones slugged over his body, thick and heavy they scrutinized his every breath. Tensing his body for the next rack of pain, he intended to show none. No longer would he give them the satisfaction. The agony was his alone and none other.

A laugh, soft at first but growing louder by the second whipped around him. The sound was cold and full of malevolence. It was like a physical touch from an icy hand as it sent shivers down his spine. The Old Ones were laughing at his death. They drew pleasure from his agony.

It was heart breaking to know they would soon be free.

Dean fought against his fear-induced jelly-filled knees and struggled to his feet. For a terrifying moment his balance seemed to swoon forward, wanting to topple him onto the cold hard concrete floor. His heart slammed against his ribs. Gaining his balance was a wobbling act. His arms shot out to the side and swung in ever increasing circles until he felt stable enough to relax.

Dean pushed himself off the wall. His first step swung out tentatively almost like a baby taking the first step forward. Putting weight on it, he moved his other leg forward.

Slowly but surely, he made it to the entrance.

Looking through the exit he noticed the crowd hadn't moved since the birds started their erratic madness. He seemed to be the only person who'd broken free of the spell.

He stepped through the exit. The crowd vanished. The buildings, cars, birds all faded from existence. The pavement and roads turned to hard-packed red and brown earth. The sky was green. Off in the distance he saw a broken black tower.

Dean spun a full three hundred and sixty degrees. Where was everything? He squeezed his eyes shut and slowly opened them. He was disappointed, shocked and terrified. The world he knew and loved had not returned.

He didn't know where he was or how he happened to be here.

And he didn't like it. It was madness. Stepping out of the unisex toilet he had stepped out of reality. Or had stepping into the unisex

toilet taken him into this... this... alternate reality? A place where graffiti swirled, demons tried to escape from mirrors, sparrows blocked the sun and the landscape changed?

Inside, deep inside, Dean knew this wasn't madness and it wasn't a figment of his imagination either. This was real. Somehow he had literally stepped into another world. It was as if he had been called here, ripped from a world he knew and understood and placed into one he could not fathom.

Another look around showed nothing but open land as far as the eye could see. A dense wasteland spread out in all directions, broken only by the tower.

Dust was thick in the air and on the ground. It caused several spasmodic coughs to issue forth that raked his chest as it drifted into his lungs. Heavy in his mouth, the dust clung to his tongue and cheeks. Repeated attempts to build up saliva to swallow away the dust failed. Fat drops of rain fell from the sky. Slowly at first but moments later the velocity increased. The speed and hardness of the falling rain pounded Dean and the dry wasteland he stood upon.

A sudden, vicious spasm of coughs raked his chest and doubled him over. Rain pelted the back of his head. Straightening up, Dean raised his face to the sky and opened his mouth.

Heavy drops pelted his tongue. Instantly he spat it out. It was raining salt water. It held the same taste of water he'd swallowed at a beach when he was a child. Although foul tasting, he opened his mouth once again to the ocean falling from the sky and allowed it to fill his mouth.

How could there be so much dust when it rained?

Heaving breath into his tired lungs, the old man stared at the ground far below the platform, a ground he had not touched in fifty years. A ground he would touch shortly. He remembered the previous watcher and he wondered why the watcher had fallen to his death. Perhaps now, he knew the answer.

"Aaron. Are you still with us?"

Aaron.

That was a word he had not heard since taking his first step to assume the post of Watcher. Aaron. It sounded foreign. A word that no longer belonged to him and held little meaning apart from a link, weak as it was, to a past life.

"How do you know my name?" the old man asked. His throat was

sore and the words came out painfully dry and slow. Each word scratched his throat, forcing a deep and rough cough from him adding more pain to an already tortured chest.

When the coughing subsided he realized the Old Ones had not answered. Taking two long breaths he repeated his question, this time without the coughs. It was difficult but he managed to hold them at bay until the six words passed his lips.

There was no answer.

Finding a small reserve of energy, he turned his head to look at the Black Tower. Perhaps they had not heard his question or just decided not to answer it. Knowing his secrets and letting him know they knew was the only torture they could deal to him. It was minuscule but to them it was power.

Exhaustion took hold as he rolled onto his side. The rain pelted his tired body relentlessly like a final insult and blurred his sight of the Black Tower. It took several seconds for his tired old eyes to focus the monstrosity scarring his kingdom.

Rain filled his mouth and Dean swirled the water against his caked cheeks and teeth. The salt was thick and the taste revolting. It was surprising he'd managed to handle it for so long. Some had dribble down his throat, and he'd near choked but it was worth it to get the dust out of his mouth.

He spat onto the ground. The water splashed in the layer of water swelling on the ground. The rain had only just started yet the ground refused to accept it, to soak it in. Dean knew an ensuing flood when he saw one.

But there didn't seem to be anything around to threaten except for the Black Tower. And that looked in fair disarray as it was. The top half was destroyed, jagged rocks and bricks jutted out at odd angles. Parts of the structure, the inner levels, were still intact. He could see sections of the inside of the tower. It was impossible to distinguish clearly exactly what he saw, as he was too far away to manage more than vague shapes moving within.

Dean turned away from the tower. Behind him stood a flooding wasteland. In all directions he looked; everything was the same. He couldn't find his entry point, which logically would be his exit point. His lips trembled with the realization there was no escape, no way back to his world. His wife, his job, his new car—all gone. Forever. And it all had to do with the image in the mirror.

The sparrows.

Only he had been able to break the hold on them. It was a test. He realized he'd been chosen, but, chosen for what? That was the question.

He turned back to face the partially destroyed tower. And looming high into the sky was a row of concrete steps. Oh boy. He had been chosen. Taking a deep breath, he faced the first step. Looking up, he couldn't see the top.

One step at a time, he told himself.

He stepped onto the first step. The rain eased.

Eighty steps later, a sweat beaded his forehead. The rain had stopped twenty steps earlier. The sun was out.

An hour later, his legs were burning with each step and just when he thought he couldn't take another step, he saw an old man lying in a drying puddle of green water.

"Jesus," he cried out, found strength and hurried to the man. He lifted the thin body out of the water and his first thought at looking upon the face was God. The old man looked like God, the images he was shown as a child in Christian children books. The long white beard, the kindly face. The robe. It all fit. But it was impossible. Then again, he was in a barren land that rained salt water and held a black tower and steps that supported themselves and rose into the heavens.

God had fallen.

Aaron opened his eyes. He barely had the strength to manage it. He expected it was one of the Old Ones come to personally finish him off and he wished to face them without fear.

He did not expect to look into the eyes of a young man. The shock startled him.

The man spoke to him. He didn't understand the words, but he didn't need to. The new Watcher had arrived. The magic had found him. Praise the Gods of the four elements.

"Welcome to your new post. Thank you."

The man looked confused at the words. Aaron gripped his hand as tightly as he could. Slowly, he turned his head and noticed the throne was rebuilt. He turned to look at the Black Tower.

New rocks replaced the destroyed rocks. Holes faded to black rock and brick. The tower was rebuilding. The magic was back in full strength.

Aaron laughed. "You are the new Watcher," he said, not expecting

an answer.

"Watcher?" the man said.

Startled, Aaron said, "You can understand me?"

The man nodded.

"What is your name?"

"Dean. You?"

"Aaron."

"How do you feel, Aaron?"

"Old."

They both laughed.

"Why am I here?"

Aaron looked into his eyes. "You are the Watcher."

"What do I watch?"

"That." Aaron pointed to the tower. It was near fully rebuilt. He understood why the Old Ones had not answered him earlier. Dean had arrived and it sealed their mouths, froze their actions. Forever would last a little longer. "You were chosen."

"I don't know about that. But one second I'm in the toilet, I walk out and end up here."

We are prisoners, Aaron thought.

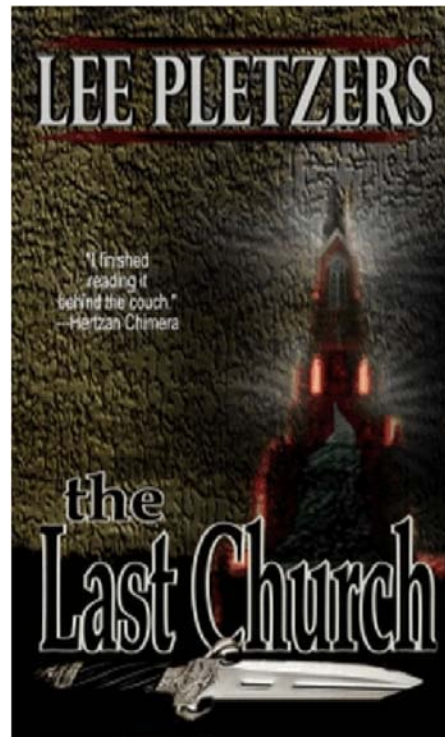
"Is there no way back?"

They spoke the truth. The old ones did not lie.

He looked at the green sky. Did they speak the truth about that as well?

It didn't matter now. Aaron closed his eyes, ready for death. A new Watcher had been found. He could rest easy now. He could die with the knowledge that a new Watcher would always be found. The Old Ones forever locked in the Black Tower. Forever prisoners. Forever.

"Old man. Aaron. You still with me? I don't know what I'm meant to do?"



"Watch," Aaron whispered.

A strange sound came alive close to his ear. His eyes snapped open, fearful the Old Ones were tricking him all this time, coaxing him into death. Accelerating their release.

Dean pulled a strange object from his pocket. It seemed to play music. He watched Dean fold it open.

"Hello."

Dean vanished.

Someone bumped into him. "Sorry, mate."

The city was alive. People crowded the sidewalk. A line of buses picked up passengers. Car horns bleared. The sky was darkening. There were no sparrows.

"Hello, Dean?"

"Yeah," he muttered, but closed the phone. His eyes were on the sky. "Oh, shit."

Where had he gone? What happened? What was that device?

The steps shook.

A large rumble came from the Black Tower. A thousand cracks tore the walls open. An explosion of colors spewed toward him. Through the air, red, greens, blues and yellows sped toward him. They curled around the steps serpent-like, gripping the cold, damp concrete before rolling onto the steps and moving up toward the waiting old man.

The Old Ones were coming to finish him off.

He welcomed them with a scream.

The pain was total, yet thankfully short. And as his eyes slowly closed, he saw the colors sweep up into the air and plunge into the green sky. Their departure left a gaping hole and through it, the ocean crashed down. ●



SIGNS AND HORTENSE

Fraser Sherman

"I assure you, Linda, Nyarlathotep is no stranger to Publix' produce section." Hortense McAllister smiled excitedly at Linda White, who had the neighboring teller's window at the First Miskatonic National Bank. "How else do you explain the obscene, abominable deformities in the cabbages?"

"I think abomination and obscenity are subjective concepts—"

"The leaves were tinted with some unholy color from out of space!"

Not for the first time, Hortense wondered how Linda could be so dense. "It's a sign that the Rapture is imminent!"

"Hortense, the Old Ones walk outside time and space as we know them, they don't go shopping for groceries. And the Necronomicon doesn't say anything about vegetables being a sign of the end times."

"You have to know how to interpret the sacred texts properly."

Hortense brushed back a strand of hair that showed the temerity to escape her tight bun. "Something very similar occurred in the first *Sane Behind* book—"

"The *Sane Behind* books?" Hortense started and realized that Tom Larrabee was standing at the counter, his thirteen-year-old daughter Kay a few paces behind, glaring at his back. "I've heard they're quite popular—"

"They're marvelous!" Hortense began making the morning change for Larrabee's Italian restaurant up the street. She avoided meeting his eyes; she always felt hot and flushed when that happened. "A literal interpretation of Alhazred's prophecies, showing how great Azathoth will Rapture the true believers, enabling us to finally leave sanity behind and dance to the music of the mad flutes forever!"

"Flute music sucks," Kay said. "The Old Ones should tell their servitors to switch to death metal."

"My little angel," Larrabee said with a rueful smile. "Quite a handful since her mother moved back up north."

"Yes, well..." Hortense adjusted her glasses, stuffed the packets of

bills into Larrabee's change bag. "I'm sure you do a fine job. There you are, \$1,000 to start the day."

"Always a pleasure, Miss McAllister." He took the bag, then tapped the back of her hand lightly. "So, do you have any children?"

"Goodness, no, I never—I have a niece. A lovely young girl. Wonderful." Hortense stopped talking, feeling the words rushing out of her mouth much too fast, and carefully slid her hand away from under Tom's—Mr. Larrabee's—fingers.

A long pause stretched out. "Da-aaad! We have to go if I'm going to ride in with Kelly!"

"Life's little emergencies." Larrabee's smile looked so rueful, it tugged at Hortense's heart for a second, then he turned, and followed his daughter out. Hortense watched the back of his slacks for a second, realized what she was doing, and busied herself making needless adjustments to her drawer.

"My god, Larrabee was totally checking you out," Linda whispered, popping a stick of fruit-flavored Mi-Go Gum. "He does every time he's in here—even your frumpy outfit can't hide that—"

"My dress isn't frumpy, it's—respectable!" Hortense clutched her silver octopoid head pendant tight and shut Tom Larrabee out of her mind. "My father always said my body was a temple to Cthulhu, not to be profaned by mortal hands."

"The way you checked out his ass, I bet you'd love being profaned." Someone pulled up at the drive-thru, and Linda crossed to that side of the teller area. "How long has it been since you had a date?"

"We were talking about the *Sane Behind* books," Hortense said quickly. Was she blushing? She hoped not. "If you've ever wanted to know about the End Times these books are the most accurate—"

"You said they were literal retellings of Alhazred." Linda accepted the thick sheaf of checks from the driver, tallied it up and slid out the receipt before she spoke again. "How can you take 'With strange eons, even death can die' literally? Alhazred's language was allegorical, there is no single definitive interpretation."

"It doesn't take a seminary education to understand Alhazred. The truth shouts out to anyone who accepts Yog-Sothoth with their heart and soul."

"That's right, you attend Dunwich Traditional, don't you?" Linda said, with that Oh, That Church tone Hortense was so used to. "Strange High Church of Mists is more my—"

"I heard Reverend Bloch speak at the ecumenical breakfast."

Hortense rolled her eyes. “Liberal feel-good preaching—being told Tsathoggua loves you just as you are sounds lovely, but it won’t save you from suffering Hell on Earth if you aren’t Raptured. I’m sure you think of yourself as a good person—“

”Are you implying I’m not?”

”No, you are—that’s why it would be a shame if you weren’t Raptured. And if you refuse to accept the literal, inerrant truth of the scriptures—“

The smile vanished. “I didn’t know Cthulhu had authorized you to separate the sheep from the goats.”

”I’m telling you this for your own good, Linda.” *Why do people get their backs up when I’m only trying to help them?* “Do you want to spend the Tribulation being hunted by night-gaunts and shantaks? Wouldn’t you rather—“

”I’m beginning to understand why Jan put in for a transfer.” Linda pointedly turned away and headed toward the vault.

My father would have flung the relevant lines from Alhazred right at your back. Hortense’ shoulders slumped. *I guess this is one more way for me to be a disappointment.*

”You saw messages from Azathoth in the morning’s paper?” The woman, smiling politely, swerved to the far side of Dr. Klein’s waiting room. “How... interesting.”

”I don’t mean he communicates with me personally,” Hortense replied with a laugh as the woman picked up a six-month-old issue of *Golf Digest* (“Wilbur Whatley says PGA success is all due to his father.”). “But you only have to look at the front page to see his design unfolding in the world.” The woman kept reading. “Britain has agreed to adopt the Euro!”

The woman stared at Hortense blankly. So did the three other patients and the receptionist. “Isn’t it obvious—as my father often said—that the nations of continental Europe are the ‘strange brood of Shub- Niggurath’ that Alhazred saw arise from the Lake of Hali? Now that ‘the stray horror is leashed to run with them all,’ the one-world government will begin to tighten its grip and oppress all who love Cthulhu, forcing them to take the mark of the seven-pointed star—“

”But other parts of Europe don’t use the Euro,” the sinister swarthy man reading *Field and Stream* said. “And my old Sunday School teacher said America became the ‘stray horror ‘when we went off the gold standard.”

”It’s not a literal star, anyway,” the receptionist said. “‘Accepting the star’ refers to the Trilateral Commission putting the first President Bush in the White House—“

How can they be so blind? Listening to the ridiculous heretical babble, Hortense could have screamed. *Have any of you studied the Necronomicon the way Father did? Have you even published one book on Alhazred’s prophecies?*

Remembering the Pnakotic Manuscripts’ warning about the spiritual perils in “dens of unbelievers” Hortense canceled her appointment. She made a note in her planner to look for a new dentist.

”Honestly, Derleth, people are idiots!.” Hortense hugged her familiar close, feeling his purr vibrate into her fingers. “They talk as if events just—happened! As if there was no plan behind it all, as if history was just a bunch of people making decisions on their own. And so few of those who realize there’s a pattern understand the weaving of the Old Ones the way Father did.”

She looked at the study table where a copy of *The Late Great Planet Yuggoth* lay next to the Scofield Reference Necronomicon. “But I’m so much weaker than he was. Father was so strong, instructing Agnes and me every day in our duty to the Old Ones—and instructing everyone else we met as well, of course. I should be delighted to witness for Yog-Sothoth wherever I go, but sometimes—“

But sometimes, what? Why have I been feeling so empty lately, as if there’s something missing in my life ... I shouldn’t need anyone but the Old Ones, Father taught me that.

So why was she suddenly thinking of Tom Larrabee?

”I’m being silly. He’s a customer, nothing more. And you know what Father would have said about me thinking... No, Derleth, I’m simply feeling the burden of being a god-fearing woman in a secular society.

”So dreadfully secular... Oh, sure, politicians love to talk about how they tackle problems by asking what the Haunter of the Dark would do, but you and I know how shallow their faith is. If someone asks about resuming human sacrifice, they blather and bob and weave, rather than admit failing to sacrifice to Azathoth is what led to the Old Ones withdrawing their protection from America on 9/11!

”And the kids today! Are any of them willing to declare for Nyarlathotep? No, not when there’s celebrity, body piercings, drugs, sex...” She thought of Tom Larrabee again and shuddered. Yes, it had

definitely been a shudder, not a tremble or a quiver. “If Father could see how sex-saturated society has become, he’d turn over in his grave.

“That’s one way I will *not* fail him, Derleth. He taught me to live as befits a bride of Shub-Niggurath, and no matter what Tom Larrabee thinks, no man is going to profane my body after 35 years of pure living!”

“Hortense, for the Whisperer’s sake!” Hortense’ younger sister Agnes poured herself a generous dollop of Scotch; Hortense pressed her lips together, but said nothing. “You’re scaring the crap out of Susan with those stories about the Tribulation.”

“I assumed she’d already read all about it in the *Sane Behind* books. They’re bestsellers, you know.”

“I teach literature at Arkham U, remember? I want her exposed to good books.”

“Remember what Father used to say: It can’t be a good book if it doesn’t impart a religious truth.”

“Father was a self-righteous tight-ass.” Agnes removed Susan’s ferret familiar from the kitchen island, sat down and rested her elbows on the Corian countertop. She beckoned for her sister to join her, but Hortense remained standing. “Those books would have been perfect for him—whoever wrote them thinks 90 percent of the Old Ones’ worshippers will be devoured by the end of the Tribulation, just like all the atheists and unbelievers.”

“The path to R’lyeh is narrow, Aggie, you know that. I realize you had—issues with Father, but he was a fine, upstanding—”

“Domineering bully.” Hortense folded her arms. “If either of us so much as looked at a boy, he got out the strap.”

“For our own good! Giving into vile lust—”

“If I hadn’t given in to Daniel, I wouldn’t have had Sue, would I?” Agnes stared into her glass and back into memory. “Remember Jerome Parker? You really think you were better off not being allowed to date him?”

“No, but—”

“Ah-ha, you admit it!”

“He was Reformed Church of Hali, it would never have gone anywhere.” Hortense fought down the memory of Jerome’s kiss at the Tsathoggua Day party. It hadn’t been that memorable a kiss, not really. “Aggie, you know I love Sue. I’m glad you had her. But while marriage may have been right for you—it’s not for me.”

“You can date without actually marrying. Or even going past first base. If faith is the problem, there are Internet dating sites for almost any church or—”

“That’s not what Father wanted for me! And I know it’s my life, but I choose to live it the way he wanted us to.” *I was an only child until I was eight. I can’t get past—I mean, forget—his teachings.*

“Hortense, the Old Ones are a force for love, not punishment.” Agnes reached out and squeezed her sister’s hand. “All they’ve ever wanted is to give us the freedom that only pure, unfettered insanity can bring; no matter how we timidly cling to the false gods of order and reason, they’ll always forgive us. Do you really think that if you start dating, they’ll have you devoured by dholes?”

“The only reason you believe that is because Father didn’t.” *Though sometimes I think it would be easier if I thought like you. So much easier...*

“Our dad had no theological training, no—”

“He wrote three best-selling books on the End Times!”

“There’s a sucker born every minute. Apparently a lot of suckers read.”

“You think preparing for the world’s end makes me a sucker?”

“You could get hit by a bus before the Rapture comes. Even if the End Times start tomorrow, what would that change? We still live by the same eternal principles—isn’t how we live our lives more important than how they end?”

“Salvation through works? Or by having a ‘loving heart?’” Hortense rolled her eyes. “Father always warned me—”

“Not to let your slutty sister drag you down. Yeah, I know.”

“Agnes, as Alhazred said in the fifth chapter—”

“Why do I bother?” Aggie put her glass and the sink and took dinner out of the freezer. “You’re too much like him.”

Hortense didn’t say anything. She reminded herself that however Agnes meant it, the words had been a compliment. *I should feel proud she said that.*

So why don’t I?

“I can’t possibly speak to Mother,” Hortense told Derleth, shaking her head as she picked up a copy of the latest *Sane Behind* novel. “Not since she started attending a Hali Congregational Church: Speaking in tongues, that would be one thing, but to take up shoggoth handling?”

Hortense stared down at Derleth for a second, then threw the book

on the faded brown couch. Suddenly, reading how Nyarlathotep would cast down all those who had taken the mark of the seven-pointed star, then bring on a utopian millennium of insanity on earth no longer seemed terribly exciting. *It's not like I'll be here for any of it, is it? I'm sure to be Raptured.*

And Aggie? Linda? Even Dr. Klein's receptionist? Do you really want to think about them in the Lake of Hali, tormented by the byakhee for their sins? I know Father said the saved would rejoice in the suffering of the damned but...

"What if he was wrong, Derleth? What if Azathoth doesn't Rapture us until I'm long dead?" She picked up her glass and took an absent sip of lukewarm lemonade. "What then?"

Agnes has Daniel and Susan.

I have a cat.

I'm a spinster.

"Is that really what you wanted, Father?" She picked up a copy of her father's last book, *2,010 Reasons the Rapture Will Happen in 2010*. "Is it what Cthulhu would want?"

For the first time in her life, Hortense had a sudden fear that the two questions might not have the same answer.

"How can you object to Necronomicon study classes, Mr. Larrabee?" Hortense did her best to balance the impulse to stare at his smile with the urge to look away and study the food court.

"I told you before, call me Tom." He popped the last of his cinnamon pretzel into his mouth. "Are you sure you don't want—"

"No, of course not—Tom." Hortense felt hot and awkward and nervous just saying it. She wished she'd gone to the mall earlier, so they wouldn't have met—*No. No I don't*. "Tom, the Necronomicon is the fundamental source of all knowledge: Science, the history of the universe, the nature of the Old Ones—"

"In theory, it's a great idea." He didn't seem offended; how long had it been since that had happened? "In practice, the teachers invariably think the classes are an excuse to convert any unbelievers in the student body. I know it's to save their souls, but we have to respect the First Amendment."

"Are you aware of how much religious illiteracy exists among today's youth?" *I should be running to FamiliarSmart before it closes. I have so much to do before lunch is over, I shouldn't be standing here... smiling!* "Not your lovely daughter, I'm sure, but—"

"Oh, if you only knew. But look, I can see I'm keeping you from finishing your chores—" Hortense' heart sank into her boots. "—so perhaps we could pick up again after you've finished? Kay's staying over at a friend's house, how about my restaurant, 7 o'clock?"

His hand came to rest on the back of hers. This time, she didn't withdraw hers.

"Don't you have to—"

"I'm giving myself the night off. The benefits of a competent staff. So—?"

"Yes." The word popped out of Hortense' mouth before she could stop it. Even though she knew he probably wanted things no decent woman should give him. "I—I'd like that very much."

"Cool." His smile made her smile back, then he walked away.

It doesn't have to be anything vulgar or sordid. We can discuss religion. I can show him exactly where the Necronomicon proves the folly of his obviously heretical beliefs.

But... Hortense realized she was still smiling. *Maybe I won't.*

Parking outside the Chez Shoggoth, Hortense glanced at herself in the rearview mirror and bit her lip. *I should have bought a nicer dress. And makeup. And I should have had Aggie show me how to apply it.*

Father would say that's the first step in the path away from the glories of R'lyeh.

Sweet Tsathoggua, please let him be wrong! Because I'm going in there, and I'm going to have dinner and then—well, who knows what I'll do?

Hortense stepped out of the car, conscious of how absurdly fast her heart was beating. She was so caught up in the sensation that for the first time since childhood, she made no attempt to see the signs of the End Times.

She stepped over a puddle by the curb without noticing it was identical in shape to the Google Earth map of the Lake of Hali.

She noticed the wind sweeping in from the Gulf of Mexico, but didn't recognize that it violated all natural weather patterns, as only a wendigo could bring about.

She wrinkled her nose at the rank scent of garbage wafting from behind the restaurant, and never connected it with Alhazred's cryptic discussion of the Tcho-Tcho people and their disdain for personal hygiene.

Oblivious to the signs unfolding around her, Hortense felt nothing

but joy as she stepped inside the restaurant and saw Tom waiting for her. She knew it was sinful, but she felt it just the same.

"You made it." He bent over and kissed her, right on the corner of her mouth, but it made every other part of her tingle as well. "I must admit, I half expected you to—"

And then the reality Hortense had walked through all her life fell away, exposing the deeper, truer reality underlying it. The fourth dimension opened up around Hortense and Tom, dropping her into an acute angle that made room for them as if it had been obtuse.

From inside the angle she saw the Tind'Losi Hounds emerge from out of time and descend upon the unbelievers eating their pastas. The End Times had truly begun.

And Tom's been Raptured too, thank Azathoth! And, even though they had to be too far away for mortal vision to glimpse them, she could see Agnes and Sue leaving the earthly plane as well. Hortense's heart sang with joy as they shifted through realms unnamable towards the glory that awaited them.

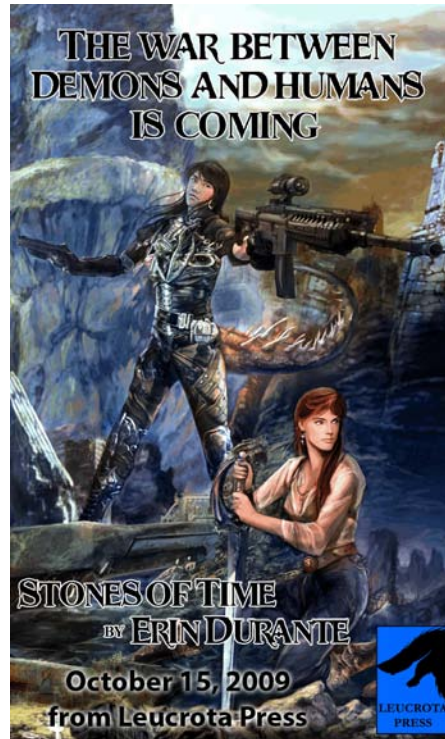
Wait a second.

Father swore Agnes would be left behind when the Rapture came. That she'd defiled her body, made herself unacceptable to the Old Ones.

I mean, it's wonderful, but... All those night sitting at home with Derleth, when I could have been... Two kisses. Thirty five years and just two kisses.

Damn you, father!

She told herself that in that moment of ultimate glory, the shallow pleasures of Earth mattered not at all. But in the last second before Hortense became free of all sanity, she knew that no matter how magnificent Azathoth's realm must be, she would have loved to engage in some heavy petting while she'd had the chance. ●



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